

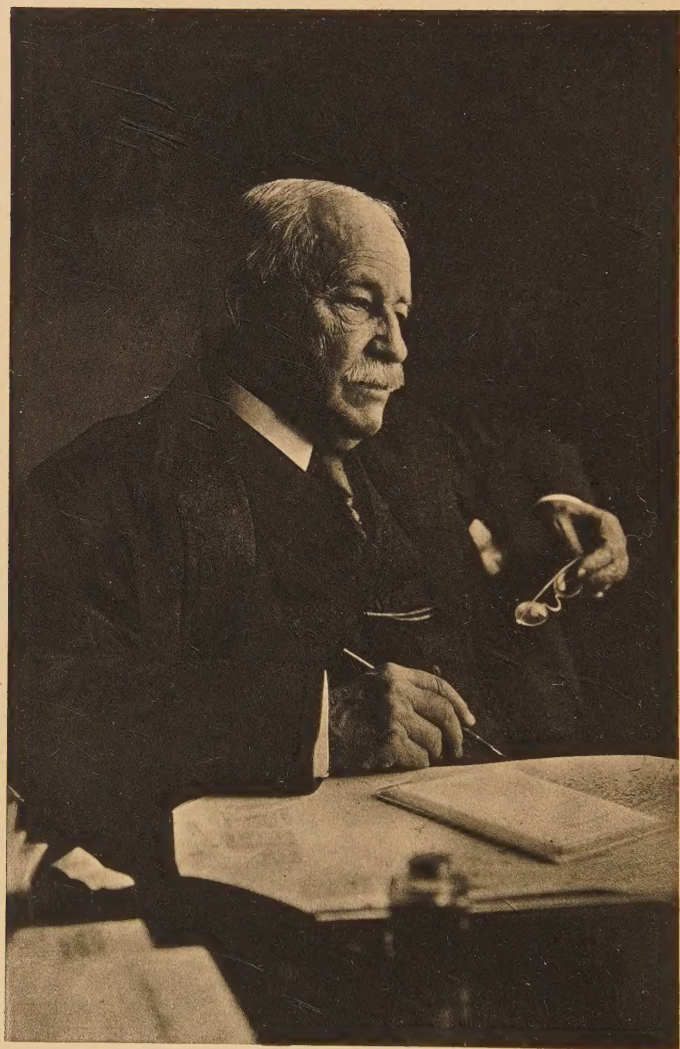
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MY LITERARY PASSIONS  
CRITICISM & FICTION





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**T**he Writings of  
William Dean Howells

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Harper & Brothers Publishers  
New York & London





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# MY LITERARY PASSIONS CRITICISM & FICTION

W. D. HOWELLS

ILLUSTRATED



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NEW YORK AND LONDON

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## ILLUSTRATIONS

W. D. HOWELLS THE WEEK HE WAS SEVENTY YEARS OLD

(*PHOTOGRAVURE*) . . . . . *Frontispiece*

W. D. HOWELLS, AGE EIGHTEEN . . . . . *Facing p.* 4

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## BIBLIOGRAPHICAL

THE papers collected here under the name of *My Literary Passions* were printed serially in a periodical of such vast circulation that they might well have been supposed to have found there all the acceptance that could be reasonably hoped for them. Nevertheless, they were reissued in a volume the year after they first appeared, in 1895, and they had a pleasing share of such favor as their author's books have enjoyed. But it is to be doubted whether any one liked reading them so much as he liked writing them—say, some time in the years 1893 and 1894, in a New York flat, where he could look from his lofty windows over two miles and a half of woodland in Central Park, and halloo his fancy wherever he chose in that faery realm of books which he re-entered in reminiscences perhaps too fond at times, and perhaps always too eager for the reader's following. The name was thought by the friendly editor of the popular publication where they were serialized a main part of such inspiration as they might be conjectured to have, and was, as seldom happens with editor and author, cordially agreed upon before they were begun.

The name says, indeed, so exactly and so fully what they are that little remains for their bibliographer to add beyond the meagre historical detail here given. Their short and simple annals could be eked out by confidences which would not appreciably enrich the

## BIBLIOGRAPHICAL

materials of the literary history of their time, and it seems better to leave them to the imagination of such posterity as they may reach. They are rather helplessly frank, but not, I hope, with all their rather helpless frankness, offensively frank. They are at least not part of the polemic which their author sustained in the essays following them in this volume, and which might have been called, in conformity with *My Literary Passions*, by the title of *My Literary Opinions* better than by the vague name which they actually wear.

They deal, to be sure, with the office of Criticism and the art of Fiction, and so far their present name is not a misnomer. It follows them from an earlier date and could not easily be changed, and it may serve to recall to an elder generation than this the time when their author was breaking so many lances in the great, forgotten war between Realism and Romanticism that the floor of the "Editor's Study" in *Harper's Magazine* was strewn with the embattled splinters. The "Editor's Study" is now quite another place, but he who originally imagined it in 1886, and abode in it until 1892, made it at once the scene of such constant offence that he had no time, if he had the temper, for defence. The great Zola, or call him the immense Zola, was the prime mover in the attack upon the masters of the Romanticistic school; but he lived to own that he had fought a losing fight, and there are some proofs that he was right. The Realists, who were undoubtedly the masters of fiction in their passing generation, and who prevailed not only in France, but in Russia, in Scandinavia, in Spain, in Portugal, were overborne in all Anglo-Saxon countries by the innumerable hosts of Romanticism, who to this day possess the land; though still, whenever a young novelist does work instantly recognizable for its truth and beauty among us, he is



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seen and felt to have wrought in the spirit of Realism. Not even yet, however, does the average critic recognize this, and such lesson as the "Editor's Study" assumed to teach remains here in all its essentials for his improvement.

Month after month for the six years in which the "Editor's Study" continued in the keeping of its first occupant, its lesson was more or less stormily delivered, to the exclusion, for the greater part, of other prophecy, but it has not been found well to keep the tempestuous manner along with the fulminant matter in this volume. When the author came to revise the material, he found sins against taste which his zeal for righteousness could not suffice to atone for. He did not hesitate to omit the proofs of these, and so far to make himself not only a precept, but an example in criticism. He hopes that in other and slighter things he has bettered his own instruction, and that in form and in fact the book is altogether less crude and less rude than the papers from which it has here been a second time evolved.

The papers, as they appeared from month to month, were not the product of those unities of time and place which were the happy conditioning of *My Literary Passions*. They could not have been written in quite so many places as times, but they enjoyed a comparable variety of origin. Beginning in Boston, they were continued in a Boston suburb, on the shores of Lake George, in a Western New York health resort, in Buffalo, in Nahant; once, twice, and thrice in New York, with reversions to Boston, and summer excursions to the hills and waters of New England, until it seemed that their author had at last said his say, and he voluntarily lapsed into silence with the applause of friends and enemies alike.

The papers had made him more of the last than of

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the first, but not as still appears to him with greater reason. At moments his deliverances seemed to stir people of different minds to fury in two continents, so far as they were English-speaking, and on the coasts of the seven seas; and some of these came back at him with such violent personalities as it is his satisfaction to remember that he never indulged in his attacks upon their theories of criticism and fiction. His opinions were always impersonal; and now as their manner rather than their make has been slightly tempered, it may surprise the belated reader to learn that it was the belief of one English critic that their author had "placed himself beyond the pale of decency" by them. It ought to be less surprising that, since these dreadful words were written of him, more than one magnanimous Englishman has penitently expressed to the author the feeling that he was not so far wrong in his overboldly hazarded convictions. The penitence of his countrymen is still waiting expression, but it may come to that when they have recurred to the evidences of his offence in their present shape.

KITTERY POINT, MAINE, *July, 1909.*

MY LITERARY PASSIONS  
CRITICISM & FICTION





# MY LITERARY PASSIONS

## I

### THE BOOKCASE AT HOME

To give an account of one's reading is in some sort to give an account of one's life; and I hope that I shall not offend those who follow me in these papers, if I cannot help speaking of myself in speaking of the authors I must call my masters: my masters not because they taught me this or that directly, but because I had such delight in them that I could not fail to teach myself from them whatever I was capable of learning. I do not know whether I have been what people call a great reader; I cannot claim even to have been a very wise reader; but I have always been conscious of a high purpose to read much more, and more discreetly, than I have ever really done, and probably it is from the vantage-ground of this good intention that I shall sometimes be found writing here rather than from the facts of the case.

But I am pretty sure that I began right, and that if I had always kept the lofty level which I struck at the outset I should have the right to use authority in these reminiscences without a bad conscience. I shall try not to use authority, however, and I do not expect to speak here of all my reading, whether it has been much

## MY LITERARY PASSIONS

or little, but only of those books, or of those authors that I have felt a genuine passion for. I have known such passions at every period of my life, but it is mainly of the loves of my youth that I shall write, and I shall write all the more frankly because my own youth now seems to me rather more alien than that of any other person.

I think that I came of a reading race, which has always loved literature in a way, and in spite of varying fortunes and many changes. From a letter of my great-grandmother's written to a stubborn daughter upon some unfilial behavior, like running away to be married, I suspect that she was fond of the high-colored fiction of her day, for she tells the wilful child that she has "planted a dagger in her mother's heart," and I should not be surprised if it were from this fine-languaged lady that my grandfather derived his taste for poetry rather than from his father, who was of a worldly wiser mind. To be sure, he became a Friend by Convincement as the Quakers say, and so I cannot imagine that he was altogether worldly; but he had an eye to the main chance: he founded the industry of making flannels in the little Welsh town where he lived, and he seems to have grown richer, for his day and place, than any of us have since grown for ours. My grandfather, indeed, was concerned chiefly in getting away from the world and its wickedness. He came to this country early in the nineteenth century and settled his family in a log-cabin in the Ohio woods, that they might be safe from the sinister influences of the village where he was managing some woollen-mills. But he kept his affection for certain poets of the graver, not to say gloomier sort, and he must have suffered his children to read them, pending that great question of their souls' salvation which was a lifelong trouble to him.



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## THE BOOKCASE AT HOME

My father, at any rate, had such a decided bent in the direction of literature, that he was not content in any of his several economical experiments till he became the editor of a newspaper, which was then the sole means of satisfying a literary passion. His paper, at the date when I began to know him, was a living, comfortable and decent, but without the least promise of wealth in it, or the hope even of a much better condition. I think now that he was wise not to care for the advancement which most of us have our hearts set upon, and that it was one of his finest qualities that he was content with a lot in life where he was not exempt from work with his hands, and yet where he was not so pressed by need but he could give himself at will not only to the things of the spirit, but the things of the mind too. After a season of scepticism he had become a religious man, like the rest of his race, but in his own fashion, which was not at all the fashion of my grandfather: a Friend who had married out of Meeting, and had ended a perfervid Methodist. My father, who could never get himself converted at any of the camp-meetings where my grandfather often led the forces of prayer to his support, and had at last to be given up in despair, fell in with the writings of Emanuel Swedenborg, and embraced the doctrine of that philosopher with a content that has lasted him all the days of his many years. Ever since I can remember, the works of Swedenborg formed a large part of his library; he read them much himself, and much to my mother, and occasionally a "Memorable Relation" from them to us children. But he did not force them upon our notice, nor urge us to read them, and I think this was very well. I suppose his conscience and his reason kept him from doing so. But in regard to other books, his fondness

## MY LITERARY PASSIONS

was too much for him, and when I began to show a liking for literature he was eager to guide my choice.

His own choice was for poetry, and the most of our library, which was not given to theology, was given to poetry. I call it the library now, but then we called it the bookcase, and that was what literally it was, because I believe that whatever we had called our modest collection of books, it was a larger private collection than any other in the town where we lived. Still it was all held, and shut with glass doors, in a case of very few shelves. It was not considerably enlarged during my childhood, for few books came to my father as editor, and he indulged himself in buying them even more rarely. My grandfather's bookstore (it was also the village drug-store) had then the only stock of literature for sale in the place; and once, when Harper & Brothers' agent came to replenish it, he gave my father several volumes for review. One of these was a copy of Thomson's *Seasons*, a finely illustrated edition, whose pictures I knew long before I knew the poetry, and thought them the most beautiful things that ever were. My father read passages of the book aloud, and he wanted me to read it all myself. For the matter of that he wanted me to read Cowper, from whom no one could get anything but good, and he wanted me to read Byron, from whom I could then have got no harm; we get harm from the evil we understand. He loved Burns, too, and he used to read aloud from him, I must own, to my inexpressible weariness. I could not away with that dialect, and I could not then feel the charm of the poet's wit, nor the tender beauty of his pathos. Moore, I could manage better; and when my father read "Lalla Rookh" to my mother I sat up to listen,



## THE BOOKCASE AT HOME

and entered into all the woes of Iran in the story of the "Fire Worshippers." I drew the line at the "Veiled Prophet of Khorassan," though I had some sense of the humor of the poet's conception of the critic in "Fadladeen." But I liked Scott's poems far better, and got from Ispahan to Edinburgh with a glad alacrity of fancy. I followed the "Lady of the Lake" throughout, and when I first began to contrive verses of my own I found that poem a fit model in mood and metre.

Among other volumes of verse on the top shelf of the bookcase, of which I used to look at the outside without penetrating deeply within, were Pope's translation of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and Dryden's *Virgil*, pretty little tomes in tree-calf, published by James Crissy in Philadelphia, and illustrated with small copper-plates, which somehow seemed to put the matter hopelessly beyond me. It was as if they said to me in so many words that literature which furnished the subjects of such pictures I could not hope to understand, and need not try. At any rate, I let them alone for the time, and I did not meddle with a volume of Shakespeare, in green cloth and cruelly fine print, which overawed me in like manner with its wood-cuts. I cannot say just why I conceived that there was something unhallowed in the matter of the book; perhaps this was a tint from the reputation of the rather profligate young man from whom my father had it. If he were not profligate I ask his pardon. I have not the least notion who he was, but that was the notion I had of him, whoever he was, or wherever he now is. There may never have been such a young man at all; the impression I had may have been pure invention of my own, like many things with children, who do not very distinctly know their dreams from their expe-

## MY LITERARY PASSIONS

riences, and live in the world where both project the same quality of shadow.

There were, of course, other books in the bookcase, which my consciousness made no account of, and I speak only of those I remember. Fiction there was none at all that I can recall, except Poe's *Tales of the Grotesque and the Arabesque* (I long afflicted myself as to what those words meant, when I might easily have asked and found out) and Bulwer's *Last Days of Pompeii*, all in the same kind of binding. History is known, to my young remembrance of that library, by a *History of the United States*, whose dust and ashes I hardly made my way through; and by a *Chronicle of the Conquest of Granada*, by the ever dear and precious Fray Antonio Agapida, whom I was long in making out to be one and the same as Washington Irving.

In school there was as little literature then as there is now, and I cannot say anything worse of our school reading; but I was not really very much in school, and so I got small harm from it. The printing-office was my school from a very early date. My father thoroughly believed in it, and he had his beliefs as to work, which he illustrated as soon as we were old enough to learn the trade he followed. We could go to school and study, or we could go into the printing-office and work, with an equal chance of learning, but we could not be idle; we must do something, for our souls' sake, though he was willing enough we should play, and he liked himself to go into the woods with us, and to enjoy the pleasures that manhood can share with childhood. I suppose that as the world goes now we were poor. His income was never above twelve hundred a year, and his family was large; but nobody was rich there or then; we lived in the simple abun-

## THE BOOKCASE AT HOME

dance of that time and place, and we did not know that we were poor. As yet the unequal modern conditions were undreamed of (who indeed could have dreamed of them forty or fifty years ago?) in the little Southern Ohio town where nearly the whole of my most happy boyhood was passed.

## II

### GOLDSMITH

WHEN I began to have literary likings of my own, and to love certain books above others, the first authors of my heart were Goldsmith, Cervantes, and Irving. In the sharply foreshortened perspective of the past I seem to have read them all at once, but I am aware of an order of time in the pleasure they gave me, and I know that Goldsmith came first. He came so early that I cannot tell when or how I began to read him, but it must have been before I was ten years old. I read other books about that time, notably a small book on Grecian and Roman mythology, which I perused with such a passion for those pagan gods and goddesses that, if it had ever been a question of sacrificing to Diana, I do not really know whether I should have been able to refuse. I adored indiscriminately all the tribes of nymphs and naiads, demigods and heroes, as well as the high ones of Olympus; and I am afraid that by day I dwelt in a world peopled and ruled by them, though I faithfully said my prayers at night, and fell asleep in sorrow for my sins. I do not know in the least how Goldsmith's *Greece* came into my hands, though I fancy it must have been procured for me because of a taste which I showed for that kind of reading, and I can imagine no greater luck for a small boy in a small town of Southwestern Ohio wellnigh fifty years ago. I have the books yet;

## GOLDSMITH

two little, stout volumes in fine print, with the marks of wear on them, but without those dishonorable blots, or those other injuries which boys inflict upon books in resentment of their dulness, or out of mere wantonness. I was always sensitive to the maltreatment of books; I could not bear to see a book faced down or dogs-eared or broken-backed. It was like a hurt or an insult to a thing that could feel.

Goldsmith's *History of Rome* came to me much later, but quite as immemorably, and after I had formed a preference for the Greek Republics, which I dare say was not mistaken. Of course I liked Athens best, and yet there was something in the fine behavior of the Spartans in battle, which won a heart formed for hero-worship. I mastered the notion of their communism, and approved of their iron money, with the poverty it obliged them to, yet somehow their cruel treatment of the Helots failed to shock me; perhaps I forgave it to their patriotism, as I had to forgive many ugly facts in the history of the Romans to theirs. There was hardly any sort of bloodshed which I would not pardon in those days to the slayers of tyrants; and the swagger form of such as despatched a despot with a fine speech was so much to my liking that I could only grieve that I was born too late to do and to say those things.

I do not think I yet felt the beauty of the literature which made them all live in my fancy, that I conceived of Goldsmith as an artist using for my rapture the finest of the arts; and yet I had been taught to see the loveliness of poetry, and was already trying to make it on my own poor account. I tried to make verses like those I listened to when my father read Moore and Scott to my mother, but I heard them with no such happiness as I read my beloved histories,

though I never thought then of attempting to write like Goldsmith. I accepted his beautiful work as ignorantly as I did my other blessings. I was concerned in getting at the Greeks and Romans, and I did not know through what nimble air and by what lovely ways I was led to them. Some retrospective perception of this came long afterward when I read his essays, and after I knew all of his poetry, and later yet when I read the *Vicar of Wakefield*; but for the present my eyes were holden, as the eyes of a boy mostly are in the world of art. What I wanted with my Greeks and Romans after I got at them was to be like them, or at least to turn them to account in verse, and in dramatic verse at that. The Romans were less civilized than the Greeks, and so were more like boys, and more to a boy's purpose. I did not make literature of the Greeks, but I got a whole tragedy out of the Romans; it was a rhymed tragedy, and in octosyllabic verse, like the "Lady of the Lake." I meant it to be acted by my schoolmates, but I am not sure that I ever made it known to them. Still, they were not ignorant of my reading, and I remember how proud I was when a certain boy, who had always whipped me when we fought together, and so outranked me in that little boys' world, once sent to ask me the name of the Roman emperor who lamented at night-fall, when he had done nothing worthy, that he had lost a day. The boy was going to use the story in a composition, as we called the school themes then, and I told him the emperor's name; I could not tell him now without turning to the book.

My reading gave me no standing among the boys, and I did not expect it to rank me with boys who were more valiant in fight or in play; and I have since found that literature gives one no more certain station



in the world of men's activities, either idle or useful. We literary folk try to believe that it does, but that is all nonsense. At every period of life, among boys or men, we are accepted when they are at leisure, and want to be amused, and at best we are tolerated rather than accepted. I must have told the boys stories out of my Goldsmith's *Greece* and *Rome*, or it would not have been known that I had read them, but I have no recollection now of doing so, while I distinctly remember rehearsing the allegories and fables of the *Gesta Romanorum*, a book which seems to have been in my hands about the same time or a little later. I had a delight in that stupid collection of monkish legends which I cannot account for now, and which persisted in spite of the nightmare confusion it made of my ancient Greeks and Romans. They were not at all the ancient Greeks and Romans of Goldsmith's histories.

I cannot say at what times I read these books, but they must have been odd times, for life was very full of play then, and was already beginning to be troubled with work. As I have said, I was to and fro between the school-house and the printing-office so much that when I tired of the one I must have been very promptly given my choice of the other. The reading, however, somehow went on pretty constantly, and no doubt my love for it won me a chance for it. There were some famous cherry-trees in our yard, which, as I look back at them, seem to have been in flower or fruit the year round; and in one of them there was a level branch where a boy could sit with a book till his dangling legs went to sleep, or till some idler or busier boy came to the gate and called him down to play marbles or go swimming. When this happened the ancient world was rolled up like a scroll, and put



## MY LITERARY PASSIONS

away until the next day, with all its orators and conspirators, its nymphs and satyrs, gods and demigods; though sometimes they escaped at night and got into the boy's dreams.

I do not think I cared as much as some of the other boys for the *Arabian Nights* or *Robinson Crusoe*, but when it came to the *Ingenious Gentleman of La Mancha*, I was not only first, I was sole.

Before I speak, however, of the beneficent humorist who next had my boyish heart after Goldsmith, let me acquit myself in full of my debt to that not unequal or unkindred spirit. I have said it was long after I had read those histories, full of his inalienable charm, mere pot-boilers as they were, and far beneath his more willing efforts, that I came to know his poetry. My father must have read the "Deserted Village" to us, and told us something of the author's pathetic life, for I cannot remember when I first knew of "sweet Auburn," or had the light of the poet's own troubled day upon the "loveliest village of the plain." The *Vicar of Wakefield* must have come into my life after that poem and before *The Traveler*. It was when I would have said that I knew all Goldsmith; we often give ourselves credit for knowledge in this way without having any tangible assets; and my reading has always been very desultory. I should like to say here that the reading of any one who reads to much purpose is always very desultory, though perhaps I had better not say so, but merely state the fact in my case, and own that I never read any one author quite through without wandering from him to others. When I first read the *Vicar of Wakefield* (for I have since read it several times, and hope yet to read it many times), I found its persons and incidents familiar, and so I suppose I must have heard it read. It

## GOLDSMITH

is still for me one of the most modern novels: that is to say, one of the best. It is unmistakably good up to a certain point, and then unmistakably bad, but with always good enough in it to be forever imperishable. Kindness and gentleness are never out of fashion; it is these in Goldsmith which make him our contemporary, and it is worth the while of any young person presently intending deathless renown to take a little thought of them. They are the source of all refinement, and I do not believe that the best art in any kind exists without them. The style is the man, and he cannot hide himself in any garb of words so that we shall not know somehow what manner of man he is within it; his speech bewrayeth him, not only as to his country and his race, but more subtly yet as to his heart, and the loves and hates of his heart. As to Goldsmith, I do not think that a man of harsh and arrogant nature, of worldly and selfish soul, could ever have written his style, and I do not think that, in far greater measure than criticism has recognized, his spiritual quality, his essential friendliness, expressed itself in the literary beauty that wins the heart as well as takes the fancy in his work.

I should have my reservations and my animadversions if it came to close criticism of his work, but I am glad that he was the first author I loved, and that even before I knew I loved him I was his devoted reader. I was not consciously his admirer till I began to read, when I was fourteen, a little volume of his essays, made up, I dare say, from the *Citizen of the World* and other unsuccessful ventures of his. It contained the papers on Beau Tibbs, among others, and I tried to write sketches and studies of life in their manner. But this attempt at Goldsmith's manner followed a long time after I tried to write in the style

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of Edgar A. Poe, as I knew it from his *Tales of the Grotesque and Arabesque*. I suppose the very poorest of these was the "Devil in the Belfry," but such as it was I followed it as closely as I could in the "Devil in the Smoke-Pipes"; I meant tobacco-pipes. The resemblance was noted by those to whom I read my story; I alone could not see it or would not own it, and I really felt it a hardship that I should be found to have produced an imitation.

It was the first time I had imitated a prose writer, though I had imitated several poets like Moore, Campbell, and Goldsmith himself. I have never greatly loved an author without wishing to write like him. I have now no reluctance to confess that, and I do not see why I should not say that it was a long time before I found it best to be as like myself as I could, even when I did not think so well of myself as of some others. I hope I shall always be able and willing to learn something from the masters of literature and still be myself, but for the young writer this seems impossible. He must form himself from time to time upon the different authors he is in love with, but when he has done this he must wish it not to be known, for that is natural too. The lover always desires to ignore the object of his passion, and the adoration which a young writer has for a great one is truly a passion passing the love of women. I think it hardly less fortunate that Cervantes was one of my early passions, though I sat at his feet with no more sense of his mastery than I had of Goldsmith's.

### III

#### CERVANTES

I RECALL very fully the moment and the place when I first heard of *Don Quixote*, while as yet I could not connect it very distinctly with anybody's authorship. I was still too young to conceive of authorship, even in my own case, and wrote my miserable verses without any notion of literature, or of anything but the pleasure of seeing them actually come out rightly rhymed and measured. The moment was at the close of a summer's day just before supper, which, in our house, we had lawlessly late, and the place was the kitchen where my mother was going about her work, and listening as she could to what my father was telling my brother and me and an apprentice of ours, who was like a brother to us both, of a book that he had once read. We boys were all shelling peas, but the story, as it went on, rapt us from the poor employ, and whatever our fingers were doing, our spirits were away in that strange land of adventures and mishaps, where the fevered life of the knight truly without fear and without reproach burned itself out. I dare say that my father tried to make us understand the satirical purpose of the book. I vaguely remember his speaking of the books of chivalry it was meant to ridicule; but a boy could not care for this, and what I longed to do at once was to get that book and plunge into its story. He told us at random of the attack

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on the windmills and the flocks of sheep, of the night in the valley of the fulling-mills with their trip-hammers, of the inn and the muleteers, of the tossing of Sancho in the blanket, of the island that was given him to govern, and of all the merry pranks at the duke's and duchess's, of the liberation of the galley-slaves, of the capture of Mambrino's helmet, and of Sancho's invention of the enchanted Duleinea, and whatever else there was wonderful and delightful in the most wonderful and delightful book in the world. I do not know when or where my father got it for me, and I am aware of an appreciable time that passed between my hearing of it and my having it. The event must have been most important to me, and it is strange I cannot fix the moment when the precious story came into my hands; though for the matter of that there is nothing more capricious than a child's memory, what it will hold and what it will lose.

It is certain my *Don Quixote* was in two small, stout volumes not much bigger each than my Goldsmith's *Greece*, bound in a sort of law-calf, well fitted to withstand the wear they were destined to undergo. The translation was, of course, the old-fashioned version of Jervas, which, whether it was a closely faithful version or not, was honest eighteenth-century English, and reported faithfully enough the spirit of the original. If it had any literary influence with me the influence must have been good. But I cannot make out that I was sensible of the literature; it was the forever enchanting story that I enjoyed. I exulted in the boundless freedom of the design; the open air of that immense scene, where adventure followed adventure with the natural sequence of life, and the days and the nights were not long enough for the events that thronged them, amidst the fields and woods, the streams and





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hills, the highways and byways, hostelries and hovels, prisons and palaces, which were the setting of that matchless history. I took it as simply as I took everything else in the world about me. It was full of meaning that I could not grasp, and there were significances of the kind that literature unhappily abounds in, but they were lost upon my innocence. I did not know whether it was well written or not; I never thought about that; it was simply there in its vast entirety, its inexhaustible opulence, and I was rich in it beyond the dreams of avarice.

My father must have told us that night about Cervantes as well as about his *Don Quixote*, for I seem to have known from the beginning that he was once a slave in Algiers, and that he had lost a hand in battle, and I loved him with a sort of personal affection, as if he were still living and he could somehow return my love. His name and nature endeared the Spanish name and nature to me, so that they were always my romance, and to this day I cannot meet a Spanish man without clothing him in something of the honor and worship I lavished upon Cervantes when I was a child. While I was in the full flush of this ardor there came to see our school, one day, a Mexican gentleman who was studying the American system of education; a mild, fat, saffron man, whom I could almost have died to please for Cervantes' and Don Quixote's sake, because I knew he spoke their tongue. But he smiled upon us all, and I had no chance to distinguish myself from the rest by any act of devotion before the blessed vision faded, though for long afterwards, in impassioned reveries, I accosted him and claimed him kindred because of my fealty, and because I would have been Spanish if I could.

I would not have had the boy-world about me know

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anything of these fond dreams; but it was my tastes alone, my passions, which were alien there; in everything else I was as much a citizen as any boy who had never heard of *Don Quixote*. But I believe that I carried the book about with me most of the time, so as not to lose any chance moment of reading it. Even in the blank of certain years, when I added little other reading to my store, I must still have been reading it. This was after we had removed from the town where the earlier years of my boyhood were passed, and I had barely adjusted myself to the strange environment when one of my uncles asked me to come with him and learn the drug business, in the place, forty miles away, where he practised medicine. We made the long journey, longer than any I have made since, in the stage-coach of those days, and we arrived at his house about twilight, he glad to get home, and I sick to death with yearning for the home I had left. I do not know how it was that in this state, when all the world was one hopeless blackness around me, I should have got my *Don Quixote* out of my bag; I seem to have had it with me as an essential part of my equipment for my new career. Perhaps I had been asked to show it, with the notion of beguiling me from my misery; perhaps I was myself trying to drown my sorrows in it. But anyhow I have before me now the vision of my sweet young aunt and her young sister looking over her shoulder, as they stood together on the lawn in the summer evening light. My aunt held my *Don Quixote* open in one hand, while she clasped with the other the child she carried on her arm. She looked at the book, and then from time to time she looked at me, very kindly but very curiously, with a faint smile, so that as I stood there, inwardly writhing in my bashfulness, I had the sense

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that in her eyes I was a queer boy. She returned the book without comment, after some questions, and I took it off to my room, where the confidential friend of Cervantes cried himself to sleep.

In the morning I rose up and told them I could not stand it, and I was going home. Nothing they could say availed, and my uncle went down to the stage-office with me and took my passage back.

The horror of cholera was then in the land; and we heard in the stage-office that a man lay dead of it in the hotel overhead. But my uncle led me to his drug-store, where the stage was to call for me, and made me taste a little camphor; with this prophylactic, Cervantes and I somehow got home together alive.

The reading of *Don Quixote* went on throughout my boyhood, so that I cannot recall any distinctive period of it when I was not, more or less, reading that book. In a boy's way I knew it well when I was ten, and a few years ago, when I was fifty, I took it up in the admirable new version of Ormsby, and found it so full of myself and of my own irrevocable past that I did not find it very gay. But I made a great many discoveries in it; things I had not dreamt of were there, and must always have been there, and other things wore a new face, and made a new effect upon me. I had my doubts, my reserves, where once I had given it my whole heart without question, and yet in what formed the greatness of the book it seemed to me greater than ever. I believe that its free and simple design, where event follows event without the fettering control of intrigue, but where all grows naturally out of character and conditions, is the supreme form of fiction; and I cannot help thinking that if we ever have a great American novel it must be built upon some such large and noble lines. As for the cen-

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tral figure, Don Quixote himself, in his dignity and generosity, his unselfish ideals, and his fearless devotion to them, he is always heroic and beautiful; and I was glad to find in my latest look at his history that I had truly conceived of him at first, and had felt the sublimity of his nature. I did not want to laugh at him so much, and I could not laugh at all any more at some of the things done to him. Once they seemed funny, but now only cruel, and even stupid, so that it was strange to realize his qualities and indignities as both flowing from the same mind. But in my mature experience, which threw a broader light on the fable, I was happy to keep my old love of an author who had been almost personally dear to me.

## IV

### IRVING

I HAVE told how Cervantes made his race precious to me, and I am sure that it must have been he who fitted me to understand and enjoy the American author who now stayed me on Spanish ground and kept me happy in Spanish air, though I cannot trace the tie in time and circumstance between Irving and Cervantes. The most I can make sure of is that I read the *Conquest of Granada* after I read *Don Quixote*, and that I loved the historian so much because I had loved the novelist much more. Of course I did not perceive then that Irving's charm came largely from Cervantes and the other Spanish humorists yet unknown to me, and that he had formed himself upon them almost as much as upon Goldsmith, but I dare say that this fact had insensibly a great deal to do with my liking. Afterwards I came to see it, and at the same time to see what was Irving's own in Irving; to feel his native, if somewhat attenuated humor, and his original, if somewhat too studied grace. But as yet there was no critical question with me. I gave my heart simply and passionately to the author who made the scenes of that most pathetic history live in my sympathy, and companioned me with the stately and gracious actors in them.

I really cannot say now whether I loved the Moors or the Spaniards more. I fought on both sides; I would

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not have had the Spaniards beaten, and yet when the Moors lost I was vanquished with them; and when the poor young King Boabdil (I was his devoted partisan and at the same time a follower of his fiery old uncle and rival, Hamet el Zegri) heaved the Last Sigh of the Moor, as his eyes left the roofs of Granada forever, it was as much my grief as if it had burst from my own breast. I put both these princes into the first and last historical romance I ever wrote. I have now no idea what they did in it, but as the story never came to a conclusion it does not greatly matter. I had never yet read an historical romance that I can make sure of, and probably my attempt must have been based almost solely upon the facts of Irving's history. I am certain I could not have thought of adding anything to them, or at all varying them.

In reading his *Chronicle* I suffered for a time from its attribution to Fray Antonio Agapida, the pious monk whom he feigns to have written it, just as in reading *Don Quixote* I suffered from Cervantes masquerading as the Moorish scribe, Cid Hamet Ben Engeli. My father explained the literary caprice, but it remained a confusion and a trouble for me, and I made a practice of skipping those passages where either author insisted upon his invention. I will own that I am rather glad that sort of thing seems to be out of fashion now, and I think the directer and franker methods of modern fiction will forbid its revival. Thackeray was fond of such open disguises, and liked to greet his reader from the mask of Yellowplush and Michael Angelo Titmarsh, but it seems to me this was in his least modern moments.

My *Conquest of Granada* was in two octavo volumes, bound in drab boards, and printed on paper very



much yellowed with time at its irregular edges. I do not know when the books happened in my hands. I have no remembrance that they were in any wise offered or commended to me, and in a sort of way they were as authentically mine as if I had made them. I saw them at home, not many months ago, in my father's library (it has long outgrown the old bookcase, which has gone I know not where), and upon the whole I rather shrank from taking them down, much more from opening them, though I could not say why, unless it was from the fear of perhaps finding the ghost of my boyish self within, pressed flat like a withered leaf, somewhere between the familiar pages.

When I learned Spanish it was with the purpose, never yet fulfilled, of writing the life of Cervantes, although I have since had some forty-odd years to do it in. I taught myself the language, or began to do so, when I knew nothing of the English grammar but the prosody at the end of the book. My father had the contempt of familiarity with it, having himself written a very brief sketch of our accidence, and he seems to have let me plunge into the sea of Spanish verbs and adverbs, nouns and pronouns, and all the rest, when as yet I could not confidently call them by name, with the serene belief that if I did not swim I would still somehow get ashore without sinking. The end, perhaps, justified him, and I suppose I did not do all that work without getting some strength from it; but I wish I had back the time that it cost me; I should like to waste it in some other way. However, time seemed interminable then, and I thought there would be enough of it for me in which to read all Spanish literature; or, at least, I did not propose to do anything less.

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I followed Irving, too, in my later reading, but at haphazard, and with other authors at the same time. I did my poor best to be amused by his *Knickerbocker History of New York*, because my father liked it so much, but secretly I found it heavy; and a few years ago when I went carefully through it again I could not laugh. Even as a boy I found some other things of his uphill work. There was the beautiful manner, but the thought seemed thin; and I do not remember having been much amused by *Bracebridge Hall*, though I read it devoutly, and with a full sense that it would be very *comme il faut* to like it. But I did like the *Life of Goldsmith*; I liked it a great deal better than the more authoritative *Life* by Forster, and I think there is a deeper and sweeter sense of Goldsmith in it. Better than all, except the *Conquest of Granada*, I liked the *Legend of Sleepy Hollow* and the story of Rip Van Winkle, with their humorous and affectionate caricatures of life that was once of our own soil and air; and the *Tales of the Alhambra*, which transported me again to the scenes of my youth beside the Xenil. It was long after my acquaintance with his work that I came to a due sense of Irving as an artist, and perhaps I have come to feel a full sense of it only now, when I perceive that he worked willingly only when he worked inventively. At last I can do justice to the exquisite conception of his *Conquest of Granada*, a study of history which, in unique measure, conveys not only the pathos, but the humor of one of the most splendid and impressive situations in the experience of the race. Very possibly something of the severer truth might have been sacrificed to the effect of the pleasing and touching tale, but I do not understand that this was really done. Upon the whole I am very well content with my first three loves in liter-

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ature, and if I were to choose for any other boy I do not see how I could choose better than Goldsmith and Cervantes and Irving, kindred spirits, and each not a master only, but a sweet and gentle friend, whose kindness could not fail to profit him.

## V

### FIRST FICTION AND DRAMA

IN my own case there followed my acquaintance with these authors certain Bæotian years, when if I did not go backward I scarcely went forward in the paths I had set out upon. They were years of the work, of the over-work, indeed, which falls to the lot of so many that I should be ashamed to speak of it except in accounting for the fact. My father had sold his paper in Hamilton and had bought an interest in another at Dayton, and we were all straining our utmost to help pay for it. My daily tasks began so early and ended so late that I had little time, even if I had the spirit, for reading; and it was not till what we thought ruin, but what was really release, came to us that I got back again to my books. Then we went to live in the country for a year, and that stress of toil, with the shadow of failure darkening all, fell from me like the horror of an evil dream. The only new book which I remember to have read in those two or three years at Dayton, when I hardly remember to have read any old ones, was the novel of *Jane Eyre*, which I took in very imperfectly, and which I associate with the first rumor of the Rochester Knockings, then just beginning to reverberate through a world that they have not since left wholly at peace. It was a gloomy Sunday afternoon when the book came under my hand; and mixed with my interest in the story was an anxiety lest

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the pictures on the walls should leave their nails and come and lay themselves at my feet; that was what the pictures had been doing in Rochester and other places where the disembodied spirits were beginning to make themselves felt. The thing did not really happen in my case, but I was alone in the house, and it might very easily have happened.

If very little came to me in those days from books, on the other hand my acquaintance with the drama vastly enlarged itself. There was a hapless company of players in the town from time to time, and they came to us for their printing. I believe they never paid for it, or at least never wholly, but they lavished free passes upon us, and as nearly as I can make out, at this distance of time, I profited by their generosity every night. They gave two or three plays at every performance to houses ungratefully small, but of a lively spirit and impatient temper that would not brook delay in the representation; and they changed the bill each day. In this way I became familiar with Shakespeare before I read him, or at least such plays of his as were most given in those days, and I saw "Macbeth" and "Hamlet," and above all "Richard III.," again and again. I do not know why my delight in those tragedies did not send me to the volume of his plays, which was all the time in the bookcase at home, but I seem not to have thought of it, and rapt as I was in them I am not sure that they gave me greater pleasure, or seemed at all finer, than "Rollo," "The Wife," "The Stranger," "Barbarossa," "The Miser of Marseilles," and the rest of the melodramas, comedies, and farces which I saw at that time. I have a notion that there were some clever people in one of these companies, and that the lighter pieces at least were well played, but I may be altogether wrong. The gentleman who took the part of villain,

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with an unfailing love of evil, in the different dramas, used to come about the printing-office a good deal, and I was puzzled to find him a very mild and gentle person. To be sure he had a mustache, which in those days devoted a man to wickedness, but by day it was a blond mustache, quite flaxen, in fact, and not at all the dark and deadly thing it was behind the footlights at night. I could scarcely gasp in his presence, my heart bounded so in awe and honor of him when he paid a visit to us; perhaps he used to bring the copy of the show-bills. The company he belonged to left town in the adversity habitual with them.

Our own adversity had been growing, and now it became overwhelming. We had to give up the paper we had struggled so hard to keep, but when the worst came it was not half so bad as what had gone before. There was no more waiting till midnight for the telegraphic news, no more waking at dawn to deliver the papers, no more weary days at the case, heavier for the doom hanging over us. My father and his brothers had long dreamed of a sort of family colony somewhere in the country, and now the uncle who was most prosperous bought a milling property on a river not far from Dayton, and my father went out to take charge of it until the others could shape their business to follow him. The scheme came to nothing finally, but in the mean time we escaped from the little city and its sorrowful associations of fruitless labor, and had a year in the country, which was blest, at least to us children, by sojourn in a log-cabin, while a house was building for us.



## VI

### LONGFELLOW'S "SPANISH STUDENT"

THIS log-cabin had a loft, where we boys slept, and in the loft were stored in barrels the books that had now begun to overflow the bookcase. I do not know why I chose the loft to renew my long-neglected friendship with them. The light could not have been good, though if I brought my books to the little gable window that overlooked the groaning and whistling gristmill I could see well enough. But perhaps I liked the loft best because the books were handiest there, and because I could be alone. At any rate, it was there that I read Longfellow's "Spanish Student," which I found in an old paper copy of his poems in one of the barrels, and I instantly conceived for it the passion which all things Spanish inspired in me. As I read I not only renewed my acquaintance with literature, but renewed my delight in people and places where I had been happy before those heavy years in Dayton. At the same time I felt a little jealousy, a little grudge, that any one else should love them as well as I, and if the poem had not been so beautiful I should have hated the poet for trespassing on my ground. But I could not hold out long against the witchery of his verse. The "Spanish Student" became one of my passions; a minor passion, not a grand one, like *Don Quixote* and the *Conquest of Granada*, but still a passion, and I should dread a little to read the piece now, lest I should disturb my old ideal

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of its beauty. The hero's rogue servant, Chispa, seemed to me, then and long afterwards, so fine a bit of Spanish character that I chose his name for my first pseudonym when I began to write for the newspapers, and signed my legislative correspondence for a Cincinnati paper with it. I was in love with the heroine, the lovely dancer whose *cachucha* turned my head, along with that of the cardinal, but whose name even I have forgotten, and I went about with the thought of her burning in my heart, as if she had been a real person.

## VII

### SCOTT

ALL the while I was bringing up the long arrears of play which I had not enjoyed in the toil-years at Dayton, and was trying to make my Spanish reading serve in the sports that we had in the woods and by the river. We were Moors and Spaniards almost as often as we were British and Americans, or settlers and Indians. I suspect that the large, mild boy, the son of a neighboring farmer, who mainly shared our games, had but a dim notion of what I meant by my strange people, but I did my best to enlighten him, and he helped me make a dream out of my life, and did his best to dwell in the region of unrealities where I preferably had my being; he was from time to time a Moor when I think he would rather have been a Mingo.

I got hold of Scott's poems, too, in that cabin loft, and read most of the tales which were yet unknown to me after those earlier readings of my father's. I could not say why "Harold the Dauntless" most took my fancy; the fine, strongly flowing rhythm of the verse had a good deal to do with it, I believe. I liked these things, all of them, and in after years I liked the "Lady of the Lake" more and more, and from mere love of it got great lengths of it by heart; but I cannot say that Scott was then or ever a great passion with me. It was a sobered affection at best, which came from my sympathy with his love of nature, and the whole kindly

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and humane keeping of his genius. Many years later, during the month when I was waiting for my passport as Consul for Venice, and had the time on my hands, I passed it chiefly in reading all his novels, one after another, without the interruption of other reading. *Ivanhoe* I had known before, and the *Bride of Lammermoor* and *Woodstock*, but the rest had remained in that sort of abeyance which is often the fate of books people expect to read as a matter of course, and come very near not reading at all, or read only very late. Taking them in this swift sequence, little or nothing of them remained with me, and my experience with them is against that sort of ordered and regular reading, which I have so often heard advised for young people by their elders. I always suspect their elders of not having done that kind of reading themselves.

For my own part I believe I have never got any good from a book that I did not read lawlessly and wilfully, out of all leading and following, and merely because I wanted to read it; and I here make bold to praise that way of doing. The book which you read from a sense of duty, or because for any reason you must, does not commonly make friends with you. It may happen that it will yield you an unexpected delight, but this will be in its own unentreated way and in spite of your good intentions. Little of the book read for a purpose stays with the reader, and this is one reason why reading for review is so vain and unprofitable. I have done a vast deal of this, but I have usually been aware that the book was subtly withholding from me the best a book can give, since I was not reading it for its own sake and because I loved it, but for selfish ends of my own, and because I wished to possess myself of it for business purposes, as it were. The reading that does one good, and lasting good, is the

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reading that one does for pleasure, and simply and unselfishly, as children do. Art will still withhold herself from thrift, and she does well, for nothing but love has any right to her.

Little remains of the events of any period, however vivid they were in passing. The memory may hold record of everything, as it is believed, but it will not be easily entreated to give up its facts, and I find myself striving in vain to recall the things that I must have read that year in the country. Probably I read the old things over; certainly I kept on with Cervantes, and very likely with Goldsmith. There was a delightful history of Ohio, stuffed with tales of the pioneer times, which was a good deal in the hands of us boys; and there was a book of Western Adventure, full of Indian fights and captivities, which we wore to pieces. Still, I think that it was now that I began to have a literary sense of what I was reading. I wrote a diary, and I tried to give its record form and style, but mostly failed. The versifying which I was always at was easier, and yielded itself more to my hand. I should be very glad to know at present what it dealt with.

## VIII

### LIGHTER FANCIES

WHEN my uncles changed their minds in regard to colonizing their families at the mills, as they did in about a year, it became necessary for my father to look about for some new employment, and he naturally looked in the old direction. There were several schemes for getting hold of this paper and that, and there were offers that came to nothing. In that day there were few salaried editors in the country outside of New York, and the only hope we could have was of some place as printers in an office which we might finally buy. The affair ended in our going to the State capital, where my father found work as a reporter of legislative proceedings for one of the daily journals, and I was taken into the office as a compositor. In this way I came into living contact with literature again, and the day-dreams began once more over the familiar cases of type. A definite literary ambition grew up in me, and in the long reveries of the afternoon, when I was distributing my case, I fashioned a future of overpowering magnificence and undying celebrity. I should be ashamed to say what literary triumphs I achieved in those preposterous deliriums. What I actually did was to write a good many copies of verse, in imitation, never owned, of Moore and Goldsmith, and some minor poets, whose work caught



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my fancy, as I read it in the newspapers or put it into type.

One of my pieces, which fell so far short of my visionary performances as to treat of the lowly and familiar theme of Spring, was the first thing I ever had in print. My father offered it to the editor of the paper I worked on, and I first knew, with mingled shame and pride, of what he had done when I saw it in the journal. In the tumult of my emotions I promised myself that if I got through this experience safely I would never suffer anything else of mine to be published; but it was not long before I offered the editor a poem myself. I am now glad to think it dealt with so humble a fact as a farmer's family leaving their old home for the West. The only fame of my poem which reached me was when another boy in the office quoted some lines of it in derision. This covered me with such confusion that I wonder that I did not vanish from the earth. At the same time I had my secret joy in it, and even yet I think it was attempted in a way which was not false or wrong. I had tried to sketch an aspect of life that I had seen and known, and that was very well indeed, and I had wrought patiently and carefully in the art of the poor little affair.

My elder brother, for whom there was no place in the office where I worked, had found one in a store, and he beguiled the leisure that light trade left on his hands by reading the novels of Captain Marryat. I read them after him with a great deal of amusement, but without the passion that I bestowed upon my favorite authors. I believe I had no critical reserves in regard to them, but simply they did not take my fancy. Still, we had great fun with *Japhet in Search of a Father*, and with *Midshipman Easy*, and we felt a fine physical shiver in the darkling moods of *Snarle-*

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*yow the Dog-Fiend*. I do not remember even the names of the other novels, except *Jacob Faithful*, which I chanced upon a few years ago and found very hard reading.

We children who were used to the free range of woods and fields were homesick for the country in our narrow city yard, and I associate with this longing the *Farmer's Boy* of Bloomfield, which my father got for me. It was a little book in blue cloth, and there were some mild wood-cuts in it. I read it with a tempered pleasure, and with a vague resentment of its trespass upon Thomson's ground in the division of its parts under the names of the seasons. I do not know why I need have felt this. I was not yet very fond of Thomson. I really liked Bloomfield better; for one thing, his poem was written in the heroic decasyllabics which I preferred to any other verse.

## IX

### POPE

I INFER from the fact of this preference that I had already begun to read Pope, and that I must have read the "Deserted Village" of Goldsmith. I fancy, also, that I must by this time have read the *Odyssey*, for the "Battle of the Frogs and Mice" was in the second volume, and it took me so much that I paid it the tribute of a bald imitation in a mock-heroic epic of a cat fight, studied from the cat fights in our back yard, with the wonted invocation to the Muse, and the machinery of partisan gods and goddesses. It was in some hundreds of verses, which I did my best to balance as Pope did, with a cæsura falling in the middle of the line, and a neat antithesis at the end.

The story of the *Odyssey* charmed me, of course, and I had moments of being intimate friends with Ulysses, but I was passing out of that phase, and was coming to read more with a sense of the author, and less with a sense of his characters as real persons; that is, I was growing more literary, and less human. I fell in love with Pope, whose life I read with an ardor of sympathy which I am afraid he hardly merited. I was of his side in all his quarrels, as far as I understood them, and if I did not understand them I was of his side anyway. When I found that he was a Catholic I was almost ready to abjure the Protestant religion for his sake; but I perceived that this was not neces-

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sary when I came to know that most of his friends were Protestants. If the truth must be told, I did not like his best things at first, but long remained chiefly attached to his rubbishing pastorals, which I was perpetually imitating, with a whole apparatus of swains and shepherdesses, purling brooks, enamelled meads, rolling years, and the like.

After my day's work at the case I wore the evening away in my boyish literary attempts, forcing my poor invention in that unnatural kind, and rubbing and polishing at my wretched verses till they did sometimes take on an effect, which, if it was not like Pope's, was like none of mine. With all my pains I do not think I ever managed to bring any of my pastorals to a satisfactory close. They all stopped somewhere about half-way. My swains could not think of anything more to say, and the merits of my shepherdesses remained undecided. To this day I do not know whether in any given instance it was the champion of Chloe or of Sylvia that carried off the prize for his fair, but I dare say it does not much matter. I am sure that I produced a rhetoric as artificial and treated of things as unreal as my master in the art, and I am rather glad that I acquainted myself so thoroughly with a mood of literature which, whatever we may say against it, seems to have expressed very perfectly a mood of civilization.

The severe schooling I gave myself was not without its immediate use. I learned how to choose between words after a study of their fitness, and though I often employed them decoratively and with no vital sense of their qualities, still in mere decoration they had to be chosen intelligently, and after some thought about their structure and meaning. I could not imitate Pope without imitating his methods, and his method was to the

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last degree intelligent. He certainly knew what he was doing, and although I did not always know what I was doing, he made me wish to know, and ashamed of not knowing. There are several truer poets who might not have done this; and after all the modern contempt of Pope, he seems to me to have been at least one of the great masters, if not one of the great poets. The poor man's life was as weak and crooked as his frail, tormented body, but he had a dauntless spirit, and he fought his way against odds that might well have appalled a stronger nature. I suppose I must own that he was from time to time a snob, and from time to time a liar, but I believe that he loved the truth, and would have liked always to respect himself if he could. He violently revolted, now and again, from the abasement to which he forced himself, and he always bit the heel that trod on him, especially if it was a very high, narrow heel, with a clocked stocking and a hooped skirt above it. I loved him fondly at one time, and afterwards despised him, but now I am not sorry for the love, and I am very sorry for the despite. I humbly own a vast debt to him, not the least part of which is the perception that he is a model of ever so much more to be shunned than to be followed in literature.

He was the first of the writers of great Anna's time whom I knew, and he made me ready to understand, if he did not make me understand at once, the order of mind and life which he belonged to. Thanks to his pastorals, I could long afterwards enjoy with the double sense requisite for full pleasure in them, such divinely excellent artificialities at Tasso's "*Aminta*" and Guarini's "*Pastor Fido*"; things which you will thoroughly like only after you are in the joke of thinking how people once seriously liked them as high examples of poetry.

## MY LITERARY PASSIONS

Of course I read other things of Pope's besides his pastorals, even at the time I read these so much. I read, or not very easily or willingly read at, his *Essay on Man*, which my father admired, and which he probably put Pope's works into my hands to have me read; and I read the *Dunciad*, with quite a furious ardor in the tiresome quarrels it celebrates, and an interest in its machinery, which it fatigues me to think of. But it was only a few years ago that I read the *Rape of the Lock*, a thing perfect of its kind, whatever we may choose to think of the kind. Upon the whole I think much better of the kind than I once did, though still not so much as I should have thought if I had read the poem when the fever of my love for Pope was at the highest.

It is a nice question how far one is helped or hurt by one's idealizations of historical or imaginary characters, and I shall not try to answer it fully. I suppose that if I once cherished such a passion for Pope personally that I would willingly have done the things that he did, and told the lies, and vented the malice, and inflicted the cruelties that the poor soul was full of, it was for the reason, partly, that I did not see these things as they were, and that in the glamour of his talent I was blind to all but the virtues of his defects, which he certainly had, and partly that in my love of him I could not take sides against him, even when I knew him to be wrong. After all, I fancy not much harm comes to the devoted boy from his enthusiasms for this imperfect hero or that. In my own case I am sure that I distinguished as to certain sins in my idols. I could not cast them down or cease to worship them, but some of their frailties grieved me and put me to secret shame for them. I did not excuse these things in them, or try to believe that they



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were less evil for them than they would have been for less people. This was after I came more or less to the knowledge of good and evil. While I remained in the innocence of childhood I did not even understand the wrong. When I realized what lives some of my poets had led, how they were drunkards, and swindlers, and unchaste, and untrue, I lamented over them with a sense of personal disgrace in them, and to this day I have no patience with that code of the world which relaxes itself in behalf of the brilliant and gifted offender; rather he should suffer more blame. The worst of the literature of past times, before an ethical conscience began to inform it, or the advance of the race compelled it to decency, is that it leaves the mind foul with filthy images and base thoughts; but what I have been trying to say is that the boy, unless he is exceptionally depraved beforehand, is saved from these through his ignorance. Still I wish they were not there, and I hope the time will come when the beast-man will be so far subdued and tamed in us that the memory of him in literature shall be left to perish; that what is lewd and ribald in the great poets shall be kept out of such editions as are meant for general reading, and that the pedant-pride which now perpetuates it as an essential part of those poets shall no longer have its way. At the end of the ends such things do defile, they do corrupt. We may palliate them or excuse them for this reason or that, but that is the truth, and I do not see why they should not be dropped from literature, as they were long ago dropped from the talk of decent people. The literary histories might keep record of them, but it is loathsome to think of those heaps of ordure, accumulated from generation to generation, and carefully passed down from age to age as something precious and vital,

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and not justly regarded as the moral offal which they are.

During the winter we passed at Columbus I suppose that my father read things aloud to us after his old habit, and that I listened with the rest. I have a dim notion of first knowing Thomson's *Castle of Indolence* in this way, but I was getting more and more impatient of having things read to me. The trouble was that I caught some thought or image from the text, and that my fancy remained playing with that while the reading went on, and I lost the rest. But I think the reading was less in every way than it had been, because his work was exhausting and his leisure less. My own hours in the printing-office began at seven and ended at six, with an hour at noon for dinner, which I often used for putting down such verses as had come to me during the morning. As soon as supper was over at night I got out my manuscripts, which I kept in great disorder, and written in several different hands on several different kinds of paper, and sawed, and filed, and hammered away at my blessed Popean heroics till nine, when I went regularly to bed, to rise again at five. Sometimes the foreman gave me an afternoon off on Saturdays, and though the days were long the work was not always constant, and was never very severe. I suspect now the office was not so prosperous as might have been wished. I was shifted from place to place in it, and there was plenty of time for my day-dreams over the distribution of my case. I was very fond of my work, though, and proud of my swiftness and skill in it. Once when the perplexed foreman could not think of any task to set me he offered me a holiday, but I would not take it, so I fancy that at this time I was not more interested in my art of poetry than in my trade of printing. What went on in the office interested me as much as the

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quarrels of the Augustan age of English letters, and I made much more record of it in the crude and shapeless diary which I kept, partly in verse and partly in prose, but always of a distinctly lower literary kind than that I was trying otherwise to write.

There must have been some mention in it of the tremendous combat with wet sponges I saw there one day between two of the boys who hurled them back and forth at each other. This amiable fray, carried on during the foreman's absence, forced upon my notice for the first time the boy who has come to be a name well-known in literature. I admired his vigor as a combatant, but I never spoke to him at that time, and I never dreamed that he, too, was effervescing with verse, probably as fiercely as myself. Six or seven years later we met again, when we had both become journalists, and had both had poems accepted by Mr. Lowell for the *Atlantic Monthly*, and then we formed a literary friendship which eventuated in the joint publication of a volume of verse. The *Poems of Two Friends* became instantly and lastingly unknown to fame; the West waited, as it always does, to hear what the East should say; the East said nothing, and two-thirds of the small edition of five hundred came back upon the publisher's hands. I imagine these copies were "ground up" in the manner of worthless stock, for I saw a single example of the book quoted the other day in a book-seller's catalogue at ten dollars, and I infer that it is so rare as to be prized at least for its rarity. It was a very pretty little book, printed on tinted paper then called "blush," in the trade, and it was manufactured in the same office where we had once been boys together, unknown to each other. Another boy of that time had by this time become foreman in the office, and he was very severe with us

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about the proofs, and sent us hurtling messages on the margin. Perhaps he thought we might be going to take on airs, and perhaps we might have taken on airs if the fate of our book had been different. As it was I really think we behaved with sufficient meekness, and after thirty four or five years for reflection I am still of a very modest mind about my share of the book, in spite of the price it bears in the book-seller's catalogue. But I have steadily grown in liking for my friend's share in it, and I think that there is at present no American of twenty-three writing verse of so good a quality, with an ideal so pure and high, and from an impulse so authentic as John J. Piatt's were then. He already knew how to breathe into his glowing rhyme the very spirit of the region where we were both native, and in him the Middle West has its true poet, who was much more than its poet, who had a rich and tender imagination, a lovely sense of color, and a touch even then securely and fully his own. I was reading over his poems in that poor little book a few days ago, and wondering with shame and contrition that I had not at once known their incomparable superiority to mine. But I used then and for long afterwards to tax him with obscurity, not knowing that my own want of simplicity and directness was to blame for that effect.

My reading from the first was such as to enamour me of clearness, of definiteness; anything left in the vague was intolerable to me; but my long subjection to Pope, while it was useful in other ways, made me so strictly literary in my point of view that sometimes I could not see what was, if more naturally approached and without any technical preoccupation, perfectly transparent. It remained for another great passion, perhaps the greatest of my life, to fuse these gyves in which I was trying so hard to dance, and free me for-

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ever from the bonds which I had spent so much time and trouble to involve myself in. But I was not to know that passion for five or six years yet, and in the mean time I kept on as I had been going, and worked out my deliverance in the predestined way. What I liked then was regularity, uniformity, exactness. I did not conceive of literature as the expression of life, and I could not imagine that it ought to be desultory, mutable, and unfixed, even if at the risk of some vagueness.

## X

### VARIOUS PREFERENCES

My father was very fond of Byron, and I must before this have known that his poems were in our bookcase. While we were still in Columbus I began to read them, but I did not read so much of them as could have helped me to a truer and freer ideal. I read "English Bards and Scotch Reviewers," and I liked its vulgar music and its heavy-handed sarcasm. These would, perhaps, have fascinated any boy, but I had such a fanaticism for methodical verse that any variation from the octosyllabic and decasyllabic couplets was painful to me. The Spencerian stanza, with its rich variety of movement and its harmonious closes, long shut "Childe Harold" from me, and whenever I found a poem in any book which did not rhyme its second line with its first I read it unwillingly or not at all.

This craze could not last, of course, but it lasted beyond our stay in Columbus, which ended with the winter, when the Legislature adjourned, and my father's employment ceased. He tried to find some editorial work on the paper which had printed his reports, but every place was full, and it was hopeless to dream of getting a proprietary interest in it. We had nothing, and we must seek a chance where something besides money would avail us. This offered itself in the village of Ashtabula, in the northeastern part of the State, and there we all found ourselves one moon-



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light night of early summer. The Lake Shore Railroad then ended at Ashtabula, in a bank of sand, and my elder brother and I walked up from the station, while the rest of the family, which pretty well filled the omnibus, rode. We had been very happy at Columbus, as we were apt to be anywhere, but none of us liked the narrowness of city streets, even so near to the woods as those were, and we were eager for the country again. We had always lived hitherto in large towns, except for that year at the Mills, and we were eager to see what a village was like, especially a village peopled wholly by Yankees, as our father had reported it. I must own that we found it far prettier than anything we had known in Southern Ohio, which we were so fond of and so loath to leave, and as I look back it still seems to me one of the prettiest little places I have ever known, with its white wooden houses, glimmering in the dark of its elms and maples, and their silent gardens beside each, and the silent, grass-bordered, sandy streets between them. The hotel, where we rejoined our family, lurked behind a group of lofty elms, and we drank at the town pump before it just for the pleasure of pumping it.

The village was all that we could have imagined of simply and sweetly romantic in the moonlight, and when the day came it did not rob it of its charm. It was as lovely in my eyes as the loveliest village of the plain, and it had the advantage of realizing the Deserted Village without being deserted.

## XI

### UNCLE TOM'S CABIN

THE book that moved me most, in our stay of six months at Ashtabula, was then beginning to move the whole world more than any other book has moved it. I read it as it came out week after week in the old *National Era*, and I broke my heart over *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, as every one else did. Yet I cannot say that it was a passion of mine like *Don Quixote*, or the other books that I had loved intensely. I felt its greatness when I read it first, and as often as I have read it since, I have seen more and more clearly that it was a very great novel. With certain obvious lapses in its art, and with an art that is at its best very simple, and perhaps primitive, the book is still a work of art. I knew this, in a measure then, as I know it now, and yet neither the literary pride I was beginning to have in the perception of such things, nor the powerful appeal it made to my sympathies, sufficed to impassion me of it. I could not say why this was so. Why does the young man's fancy, when it lightly turns to thoughts of love, turn this way and not that? There seems no more reason for one than for the other.

Instead of remaining steeped to the lips in the strong interest of what is still perhaps our chief fiction, I shed my tribute of tears, and went on my way. I did not try to write a story of slavery, as I might very well have done; I did not imitate either the make or

## UNCLE TOM'S CABIN

the manner of Mrs. Stowe's romance; I kept on at my imitation of Pope's pastorals, which I dare say I thought much finer, and worthier the powers of such a poet as I meant to be. I did this, as I must have felt then, at some personal risk of a supernatural kind, for my studies were apt to be prolonged into the night after the rest of the family had gone to bed, and a certain ghost, which I had every reason to fear, might very well have visited the small room given me to write in. There was a story, which I shrank from verifying, that a former inmate of our house had hung himself in it, but I do not know to this day whether it was true or not. The doubt did not prevent him from dangling at the door-post, in my consciousness, and many a time I shunned the sight of this problematical suicide by keeping my eyes fastened on the book before me. It was a very simple device, but perfectly effective, as I think any one will find who employs it in like circumstances; and I would really like to commend it to growing boys troubled as I was then.

I never heard who the poor soul was, or why he took himself out of the world, if he really did so, or if he ever was in it; but I am sure that my passion for Pope, and my purpose of writing pastorals, must have been powerful indeed to carry me through dangers of that kind. I suspect that the strongest proof of their existence was the gloomy and ruinous look of the house, which was one of the oldest in the village, and the only one that was for rent there. We went into it because we must, and we were to leave it as soon as we could find a better. But before this happened we left Ashtabula, and I parted with one of the few possibilities I have enjoyed of seeing a ghost on his own ground, as it were.

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I was not sorry, for I believe I never went in or came out of the place, by day or by night, without a shudder, more or less secret; and at least, now, we should be able to get another house.

## XII

### OSSIAN

VERY likely the reading of Ossian had something to do with my morbid anxieties. I had read Byron's imitation of him before that, and admired it prodigiously, and when my father got me the book—as usual I did not know where or how he got it—not all the tall forms that moved before the eyes of haunted bards in the dusky vale of autumn could have kept me from it. There were certain outline illustrations in it, which were very good in the cold Flaxman manner, and helped largely to heighten the fascination of the poems for me. They did not supplant the pastorals of Pope in my affections, and they were never the grand passion with me that Pope's poems had been.

I began at once to make my imitations of Ossian, and I dare say they were not windier and mistier than the original. At the same time I read the literature of the subject, and gave the pretensions of Macpherson an unquestioning faith. I should have made very short work of any one who had impugned the authenticity of the poems, but happily there was no one who held the contrary opinion in that village, so far as I knew, or who cared for Ossian, or had even heard of him. This saved me a great deal of heated controversy with my contemporaries, but I had it out in many angry reveries with Dr. Johnson and others, who had dared to say in their time that the poems of Ossian were not genuine lays of the Gaelic bard, handed

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down from father to son, and taken from the lips of old women in Highland huts, as Macpherson claimed.

In fact I lived over in my small way the epoch of the eighteenth century in which these curious frauds found polite acceptance all over Europe, and I think yet that they were really worthier of acceptance than most of the artificialities that then passed for poetry. There was a light of nature in them, and this must have been what pleased me, so long shut up to the studio-work of Pope. But strangely enough I did not falter in my allegiance to him, or realize that here in this free form was a deliverance, if I liked, from the fetters and manacles which I had been at so much pains to fit myself with. Probably nothing would then have persuaded me to put them off permanently, or to do more than lay them aside for the moment while I tried that new stop and that new step.

I think that even then I had an instinctive doubt whether formlessness was really better than formality. Something, it seems to me, may be contained and kept alive in formality, but in formlessness everything spills and wastes away. This is what I find the fatal defect of our American Ossian, Walt Whitman, whose way is where artistic madness lies. He had great moments, beautiful and noble thoughts, generous aspirations, and a heart wide and warm enough for the whole race, but he had no bounds, no shape; he was as liberal as the casing air, but he was often as vague and intangible. I cannot say how long my passion for Ossian lasted, but not long, I fancy, for I cannot find any trace of it in the time following our removal from Ashtabula to the county seat at Jefferson. I kept on with Pope, I kept on with Cervantes, I kept on with Irving, but I suppose there was really not substance enough in Ossian to feed my passion, and it died of inanition.



### XIII

#### SHAKESPEARE

THE establishment of our paper in the village where there had been none before, and its enlargement from four to eight pages, were events so filling that they left little room for any other excitement but that of getting acquainted with the young people of the village, and going to parties, and sleigh rides, and walks, and drives, and picnics, and dances, and all the other pleasures in which that community seemed to indulge beyond any other we had known. The village was smaller than the one we had just left, but it was by no means less lively, and I think that for its size and time and place it had an uncommon share of what has since been called culture. The intellectual experience of the people was mainly theological and political, as it was everywhere in that day, but there were several among them who had a real love for books, and when they met at the druggist's, as they did every night, to dispute of the inspiration of the Scriptures and the principles of the Free Soil party, the talk sometimes turned upon the respective merits of Dickens and Thackeray, Gibbon and Macaulay, Wordsworth and Byron. There were law students who read "*Noctes Ambrosianæ*," the *Age of Reason*, and Bailey's "*Festus*," as well as Blackstone's *Commentaries*; and there was a public library in that village of six hundred people, small but very well selected, which was kept in

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one of the lawyers' offices, and was free to all. It seems to me now that the people met there oftener than they do in most country places, and rubbed their wits together more, but this may be one of those pleasing illusions of memory which men in later life are subject to.

I insist upon nothing, but certainly the air was friendlier to the tastes I had formed than any I had yet known, and I found a wider if not deeper sympathy with them. There was one of our printers who liked books, and we went through *Don Quixote* together again, and through the *Conquest of Granada*, and we began to read other things of Irving's. There was a very good little stock of books at the village drug-store, and among those that began to come into my hands were the poems of Dr. Holmes, stray volumes of De Quincey, and here and there minor works of Thackeray. I believe I had no money to buy them, but there was an open account, or a comity, between the printer and the bookseller, and I must have been allowed a certain discretion in regard to getting books.

Still I do not think I went far in the more modern authors, or gave my heart to any of them. Suddenly, it was now given to Shakespeare, without notice or reason, that I can recall, except that my friend liked him too, and that we found it a double pleasure to read him together. Printers in the old-time offices were always spouting Shakespeare more or less, and I suppose I could not have kept away from him much longer in the nature of things. I cannot fix the time or place when my friend and I began to read him, but it was in the fine print of that unhallowed edition of ours, and presently we had great lengths of him by heart, out of "Hamlet," out of "The Tempest," out of "Macbeth," out of "Richard III.," out of "Midsum-

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mer-Night's Dream," out of the "Comedy of Errors," out of "Julius Cæsar," out of "Measure for Measure," out of "Romeo and Juliet," out of "Two Gentlemen of Verona."

These were the plays that we loved, and must have read in common, or at least at the same time: but others that I more especially liked were the Histories, and among them particularly were the Henrys, where Falstaff appeared. This gross and palpable reprobate greatly took my fancy. I delighted in him immensely, and in his comrades, Pistol, and Bardolph, and Nym. I could not read of his death without emotion, and it was a personal pang to me when the prince, crowned king, denied him: blackguard for blackguard, I still think the prince the worse blackguard. Perhaps I flatter myself, but I believe that even then, as a boy of sixteen, I fully conceived of Falstaff's character, and entered into the author's wonderfully humorous conception of him. There is no such perfect conception of the selfish sensualist in literature, and the conception is all the more perfect because of the wit that lights up the vice of Falstaff, a cold light without tenderness, for he was not a good fellow, though a merry companion. I am not sure but I should put him beside Hamlet, and on the same level, for the merit of his artistic completeness, and at one time I much preferred him, or at least his humor.

As to Falstaff personally, or his like, I was rather fastidious, and would not have made friends with him in the flesh, much or little. I revelled in all his appearances in the Histories, and I tried to be as happy where a factitious and perfunctory Falstaff comes to life again in the "Merry Wives of Windsor," though at the bottom of my heart I felt the difference. I began to make my imitations of Shakespeare, and I wrote

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out passages where Falstaff and Pistol and Bardolph talked together, in that Ercles vein which is so easily caught. This was after a year or two of the irregular and interrupted acquaintance with the author which has been my mode of friendship with all the authors I have loved. My worship of Shakespeare went to heights and lengths that it had reached with no earlier idol, and there was a supreme moment, once, when I found myself saying that the creation of Shakespeare was as great as the creation of a planet.

There ought certainly to be some bound beyond which the cult of favorite authors should not be suffered to go. I should keep well within the limit of that early excess now, and should not liken the creation of Shakespeare to the creation of any heavenly body bigger, say, than one of the nameless asteroids that revolve between Mars and Jupiter. Even this I do not feel to be a true means of comparison, and I think that in the case of all great men we like to let our wonder mount and mount, till it leaves the truth behind, and honesty is pretty much cast out as ballast. A wise criticism will no more magnify Shakespeare because he is already great than it will magnify any less man. But we are loaded down with the responsibility of finding him all we have been told he is, and we must do this or suspect ourselves of a want of taste, a want of sensibility. At the same time, we may really be honester than those who have led us to expect this or that of him, and more truly his friends. I wish the time might come when we could read Shakespeare, and Dante, and Homer, as sincerely and as fairly as we read any new book by the least known of our contemporaries. The course of criticism is towards this, but when I began to read Shakespeare I should not have ventured to think that he was not at every moment great. I should no

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more have thought of questioning the poetry of any passage in him than of questioning the proofs of holy writ. All the same, I knew very well that much which I read was really poor stuff, and the persons and positions were often preposterous. It is a great pity that the ardent youth should not be permitted and even encouraged to say this to himself, instead of falling slavishly before a great author and accepting him at all points as infallible. Shakespeare is fine enough and great enough when all the possible detractions are made, and I have no fear of saying now that he would be finer and greater for the loss of half his work, though if I had heard any one say such a thing then I should have held him as little better than one of the wicked.

Upon the whole it was well that I had not found my way to Shakespeare earlier, though it is rather strange that I had not. I knew him on the stage in most of the plays that used to be given. I had shared the conscience of Macbeth, the passion of Othello, the doubt of Hamlet; many times, in my natural affinity for villains, I had mocked and suffered with Richard III.

Probably no dramatist ever needed the stage less, and none ever brought more to it. There have been few joys for me in life comparable to that of seeing the curtain rise on "Hamlet," and hearing the guards begin to talk about the ghost; and yet how fully this joy imparts itself without any material embodiment! It is the same in the whole range of his plays: they fill the scene, but if there is no scene they fill the soul. They are neither worse nor better because of the theatre. They are so great that it cannot hamper them; they are so vital that they enlarge it to their own proportions and endue it with something of their own living force. They make it the size of life, and yet they retire it so wholly that you think no more of it than you think of



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the physiognomy of one who talks importantly to you. I have heard people say that they would rather not see Shakespeare played than to see him played ill, but I cannot agree with them. He can better afford to be played ill than any other man that ever wrote. Whoever is on the stage, it is always Shakespeare who is speaking to me, and perhaps this is the reason why in the past I can trace no discrepancy between reading his plays and seeing them.

The effect is so equal from either experience that I am not sure as to some plays whether I read them or saw them first, though as to most of them I am aware that I never saw them at all; and if the whole truth must be told there is still one of his plays that I have not read, and I believe it is esteemed one of his greatest. There are several, with all my reading of others, that I had not read till within a few years; and I do not think I should have lost much if I had never read "Pericles" and "Winter's Tale."

In those early days I had no philosophized preference for reality in literature, and I dare say if I had been asked, I should have said that the plays of Shakespeare where reality is least felt were the most imaginative; that is the belief of the puerile critics still; but I suppose it was my instinctive liking for reality that made the great Histories so delightful to me, and that rendered "Macbeth" and "Hamlet" vital in their very ghosts and witches. There I found a world appreciable to experience, a world inexpressibly vaster and grander than the poor little affair that I had only known a small obscure corner of, and yet of one quality with it, so that I could be as much at home and citizen in it as where I actually lived. There I found joy and sorrow mixed, and nothing abstract or typical, but everything standing for itself, and not for some other thing. Then,



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I suppose it was the interfusion of humor through so much of it, that made it all precious and friendly. I think I had a native love of laughing, which was fostered in me by my father's way of looking at life, and had certainly been flattered by my intimacy with Cervantes; but whether this was so or not, I know that I liked best and felt deepest those plays and passages in Shakespeare where the alliance of the tragic and the comic was closest. Perhaps in a time when self-consciousness is so widespread, it is the only thing that saves us from ourselves. I am sure that without it I should not have been naturalized to that world of Shakespeare's Histories, where I used to spend so much of my leisure, with such a sense of his own intimate companionship there as I had nowhere else. I felt that he must somehow like my being in the joke of it all, and that in his great heart he had room for a boy willing absolutely to lose himself in him, and be as one of his creations.

It was the time of life with me when a boy begins to be in love with the pretty faces that then peopled this world so thickly, and I did not fail to fall in love with the ladies of that Shakespeare-world where I lived equally. I cannot tell whether it was because I found them like my ideals here, or whether my ideals acquired merit because of their likeness to the realities there; they appeared to be all of one degree of enchanting loveliness; but upon the whole I must have preferred them in the plays, because it was so much easier to get on with them there; I was always much better dressed there; I was vastly handsomer; I was not bashful or afraid, and I had some defects of these advantages to contend with here.

That friend of mine, the printer whom I have mentioned, was one with me in a sense of the Shakespearean

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humor, and he dwelt with me in the sort of double being I had in those two worlds. We took the book into the woods at the ends of the long summer afternoons that remained to us when we had finished our work, and on the shining Sundays of the warm, late spring, the early, warm autumn, and we read it there on grassy slopes or heaps of fallen leaves; so that much of the poetry is mixed for me with a rapturous sense of the out-door beauty of this lovely natural world. We read turn about, one taking the story up as the other tired, and as we read the drama played itself under the open sky and in the free air with such orchestral effects as the sighing woods or some rippling stream afforded. It was not interrupted when a squirrel dropped a nut on us from the top of a tall hickory; and the plaint of a meadow-lark prolonged itself with unbroken sweetness from one world to the other.

But I think it takes two to read in the open air. The pressure of walls is wanted to keep the mind within itself when one reads alone; otherwise it wanders and disperses itself through nature. When my friend left us for want of work in the office, or from the vagarious impulse which is so strong in our craft, I took my Shakespeare no longer to the woods and fields, but pored upon him mostly by night, in the narrow little space which I had for my study, under the stairs at home. There was a desk pushed back against the wall, which the irregular ceiling sloped down to meet behind it, and at my left was a window, which gave a good light on the writing-leaf of my desk. This was my workshop for six or seven years, and it was not at all a bad one; I have had many since that were not so much to the purpose; and though I would not live my life over, I would willingly enough have that little study mine again. But it is gone as utterly as the faces and

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voices that made home around it, and that I was fierce to shut out of it, so that no sound or sight should molest me in the pursuit of the end which I sought gropingly, blindly, with very little hope, but with an intense ambition, and a courage that gave way under no burden, before no obstacle. Long ago changes were made in the low, rambling house which threw my little closet into a larger room; but this was not until after I had left it many years; and as long as I remained a part of that dear and simple home it was my place to read, to write, to muse, to dream.

I sometimes wish in these later years that I had spent less time in it, or that world of books which it opened into; that I had seen more of the actual world, and had learned to know my brethren in it better. I might so have amassed more material for after use in literature, but I had to fit myself to use it, and I suppose that this was what I was doing, in my own way, and by such light as I had. I often toiled wrongly and foolishly; but certainly I toiled, and I suppose no work is wasted. Some strength, I hope, was coming to me, even from my mistakes, and though I went over ground that I need not have traversed, if I had not been left so much to find the way alone, yet I was not standing still, and some of the things that I then wished to do I have done. I do not mind owning that in others I have failed. For instance, I have never surpassed Shakespeare as a poet, though I once firmly meant to do so; but then, it is to be remembered that very few other people have surpassed him, and that it would not have been easy.

## XIV

### IK MARVEL

MY ardor for Shakespeare must have been at its height when I was between sixteen and seventeen years old, for I fancy when I began to formulate my admiration, and to try to measure his greatness in phrases, I was less simply impassioned than at some earlier time. At any rate, I am sure that I did not proclaim his planetary importance in creation until I was at least nineteen. But even at an earlier age I no longer worshipped at a single shrine; there were many gods in the temple of my idolatry, and I bowed the knee to them all in a devotion which, if it was not of one quality, was certainly impartial. While I was reading, and thinking, and living Shakespeare with such an intensity that I do not see how there could have been room in my consciousness for anything else, there seem to have been half a dozen other divinities there, great and small, whom I have some present difficulty in distinguishing. I kept Irving, and Goldsmith, and Cervantes on their old altars, but I added new ones, and these I translated from the contemporary literary world quite as often as from the past. I am rather glad that among them was the gentle and kindly Ik Marvel, whose *Reveries of a Bachelor* and whose *Dream Life* the young people of that day were reading with a tender rapture which would not be altogether surprising, I dare say, to the young people of this. The books have survived the span

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of immortality fixed by our amusing copyright laws, and seem now, when any pirate publisher may plunder their author, to have a new life before them. Perhaps this is ordered by Providence, that those who have no right to them may profit by them, in that divine contempt of such profit which Providence so often shows.

I cannot understand just how I came to know of the books, but I suppose it was through the contemporary criticism which I was then beginning to read, wherever I could find it, in the magazines and newspapers; and I could not say why I thought it would be very *comme il faut* to like them. Probably the literary fine world, which is always rubbing shoulders with the other fine world, and bringing off a little of its powder and perfume, was then dawning upon me, and I was wishing to be of it, and to like the things that it liked; I am not so anxious to do it now. But if this is true, I found the books better than their friends, and had many a heartache from their pathos, many a genuine glow of purpose from their high import, many a tender suffusion from their sentiment. I dare say I should find their pose now a little old-fashioned. I believe it was rather full of sighs, and shrugs and starts, expressed in dashes, and asterisks, and exclamations, but I am sure that the feeling was the genuine and manly sort which is of all times and always the latest wear. Whatever it was, it sufficed to win my heart, and to identify me with whatever was most romantic and most pathetic in it. I read *Dream Life* first—though the *Reveries of a Bachelor* was written first, and I believe is esteemed the better book—and *Dream Life* remains first in my affections. I have now little notion what it was about, but I love its memory. The book is associated especially in my mind with one golden day of Indian summer, when I carried it into the woods with me, and abandoned my-



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self to a welter of emotion over its page. I lay under a crimson maple, and I remember how the light struck through it and flushed the print with the gules of the foliage. My friend was away by this time on one of his several absences in the Northwest, and I was quite alone in the absurd and irrelevant melancholy with which I read myself and my circumstances into the book. I began to read them out again in due time, clothed with the literary airs and graces that I admired in it, and for a long time I imitated Ik Marvel in the voluminous letters I wrote my friend in compliance with his Shakespearean prayer:

“To Milan let me hear from thee by letters,  
Of thy success in love, and what news else  
Betideth here in absence of thy friend;  
And I likewise will visit thee with mine.”

Milan was then presently Sheboygan, Wisconsin, and Verona was our little village; but they both served the soul of youth as well as the real places would have done, and were as really Italian as anything else in the situation was really this or that. Heaven knows what gaudy sentimental parade we made in our borrowed plumes, but if the travesty had kept itself to the written word it would have been all well enough. My misfortune was to carry it into print when I began to write a story in the Ik Marvel manner, or rather to compose it in type at the case, for that was what I did; and it was not altogether imitated from Ik Marvel either, for I drew upon the easier art of Dickens at times, and helped myself out with bald parodies of *Bleak House* in many places. It was all very well at the beginning, but I had not reckoned with the future sufficiently to have started with any clear ending in my mind, and as I went on I began to find myself more and more in doubt



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about it. My material gave out; incidents failed me; the characters wavered and threatened to perish on my hands. To crown my misery there grew up an impatience with the story among its readers, and this found its way to me one day when I overheard an old farmer who came in for his paper say that he did not think that story amounted to much. I did not think so either, but it was deadly to have it put into words, and how I escaped the mortal effect of the stroke I do not know. Somehow I managed to bring the wretched thing to a close, and to live it slowly into the past. Slowly it seemed then, but I dare say it was fast enough; and there is always this consolation to be whispered in the ear of wounded vanity, that the world's memory is equally bad for failure and success; that if it will not keep your triumphs in mind as you think it ought, neither will it long dwell upon your defeats. But that experience was really terrible. It was like some dreadful dream one has of finding one's self in battle without the courage needed to carry one creditably through the action, or on the stage unprepared by study of the part which one is to appear in. I have never looked at that story since, so great was the shame and anguish that I suffered from it, and yet I do not think it was badly conceived, or attempted upon lines that were mistaken. If it were not for what happened in the past I might like some time to write a story on the same lines in the future.

## XV

### DICKENS

WHAT I have said of Dickens reminds me that I had been reading him at the same time that I had been reading *Ik Marvel*; but a curious thing about the reading of my later boyhood is that the dates do not sharply detach themselves one from another. This may be so because my reading was much more multifarious than it had been earlier, or because I was reading always two or three authors at a time. I think Macaulay a little antedated Dickens in my affections, but when I came to the novels of that masterful artist (as I must call him, with a thousand reservations as to the times when he is not a master and not an artist), I did not fail to fall under his spell.

This was in a season of great depression, when I began to feel in broken health the effect of trying to burn my candle at both ends. It seemed for a while very simple and easy to come home in the middle of the afternoon, when my task at the printing-office was done, and sit down to my books in my little study, which I did not finally leave until the family were in bed; but it was not well, and it was not enough that I should like to do it. The most that can be said in defence of such a thing is that with the strong native impulse and the conditions it was inevitable. If I was to do the thing I wanted to do I was to do it in that way, and I wanted to do that thing, whatever it was,

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more than I wanted to do anything else, and even more than I wanted to do nothing. I cannot make out that I was fond of study, or cared for the things I was trying to do, except as a means to other things. As far as my pleasure went, or my natural bent was concerned, I would rather have been wandering through the woods with a gun on my shoulder, or lying under a tree, or reading some book that cost me no sort of effort. But there was much more than my pleasure involved; there was a hope to fulfil, an aim to achieve, and I could no more have left off trying for what I hoped and aimed at than I could have left off living, though I did not know very distinctly what either was. As I look back at the endeavor of those days much of it seems mere purblind groping, wilful and wandering. I can see that doing all by myself I was not truly a law to myself, but only a sort of helpless force.

I studied Latin because I believed that I should read the Latin authors, and I suppose I got as much of the language as most school-boys of my age, but I never read any Latin author but Cornelius Nepos. I studied Greek, and I learned so much of it as to read a chapter of the Testament, and an ode of Anacreon. Then I left it, not because I did not mean to go farther, or indeed stop short of reading all Greek literature, but because that friend of mine and I talked it over and decided that I could go on with Greek any time, but I had better for the present study German, with the help of a German who had come to the village. Apparently I was carrying forward an attack on French at the same time, for I distinctly recall my failure to enlist with me an old gentleman who had once lived a long time in France, and whom I hoped to get at least an accent from. Perhaps because he knew he had no accent worth speaking of, or perhaps because he did not want the

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bother of imparting it, he never would keep any of the engagements he made with me, and when we did meet he so abounded in excuses and subterfuges that he finally escaped me, and I was left to acquire an Italian accent of French in Venice seven or eight years later. At the same time I was reading Spanish, more or less, but neither wisely nor too well. Having had so little help in my studies, I had a stupid pride in refusing all, even such as I might have availed myself of, without shame, in books, and I would not read any Spanish author with English notes. I would have him in an edition wholly Spanish from beginning to end, and I would fight my way through him single-handed, with only such aid as I must borrow from a lexicon.

I now call this stupid, but I have really no more right to blame the boy who was once I than I have to praise him, and I am certainly not going to do that. In his day and place he did what he could in his own way; he had no true perspective of life, but I do not know that youth ever has that. Some strength came to him finally from the mere struggle, undirected and misdirected as it often was, and such mental fibre as he had was toughened by the prolonged stress. It could be said, of course, that the time apparently wasted in these effectless studies could have been well spent in deepening and widening a knowledge of English literature never yet too great, and I have often said this myself; but then, again, I am not sure that the studies were altogether effectless. I have sometimes thought that greater skill had come to my hand from them than it would have had without, and I have trusted that in making known to me the sources of so much English, my little Latin and less Greek have enabled me to use my own speech with a subtler sense of it than I should have had otherwise.

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But I will by no means insist upon my conjecture. What is certain is that for the present my studies, without method and without stint, began to tell upon my health, and that my nerves gave way in all manner of hypochondriacal fears. These finally resolved themselves into one, incessant, inexorable, which I could escape only through bodily fatigue, or through some absorbing interest that took me out of myself altogether and filled my morbid mind with the images of another's creation.

In this mood I first read Dickens, whom I had known before in the reading I had listened to. But now I devoured his books one after another as fast as I could read them. I plunged from the heart of one to another, so as to leave myself no chance for the horrors that beset me. Some of them remain associated with the gloom and misery of that time, so that when I take them up they bring back its dreadful shadow. But I have since read them all more than once, and I have had my time of thinking Dickens, talking Dickens, and writing Dickens, as we all had who lived in the days of the mighty magician. I fancy the readers who have come to him since he ceased to fill the world with his influence can have little notion how great it was. In that time he colored the parlance of the English-speaking race, and formed upon himself every minor talent attempting fiction. While his glamour lasted it was no more possible for a young novelist to escape writing Dickens than it was for a young poet to escape writing Tennyson. I admired other authors more; I loved them more, but when it came to a question of trying to do something in fiction I was compelled, as by a law of nature, to do it at least partially in his way.

All the while that he held me so fast by his potent charm I was aware that it was a very rough magic



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now and again, but I could not assert my sense of this against him in matters of character and structure. To these I gave in helplessly; their very grotesqueness was proof of their divine origin, and I bowed to the crudest manifestations of his genius in these kinds as if they were revelations not to be doubted without sacrilege. But in certain small matters, as it were of ritual, I suffered myself to think, and I remember boldly speaking my mind about his style, which I thought bad.

I spoke it even to the quaint character whom I borrowed his books from, and who might almost have come out of his books. He lived in Dickens in a measure that I have never known another to do, and my contumely must have brought him a pang that was truly a personal grief. He forgave it, no doubt because I bowed in the Dickens worship without question on all other points. He was then a man well on towards fifty, and he had come to America early in life, and had lived in our village many years, without casting one of his English prejudices, or ceasing to be of a contrary opinion on every question, political, religious and social. He had no fixed belief, but he went to the service of his church whenever it was held among us, and he revered the Book of Common Prayer while he disputed the authority of the Bible with all comers. He had become a citizen, but he despised democracy, and achieved a hardy consistency only by voting with the pro-slavery party upon all measures friendly to the institution which he considered the scandal and reproach of the American name. From a heart tender to all, he liked to say wanton, savage and cynical things, but he bore no malice if you gainsaid him. I know nothing of his origin, except the fact of his being an Englishman, or what his first calling had



## DICKENS

been; but he had evolved among us from a house-painter to an organ-builder, and he had a passionate love of music. He built his organs from the ground up, and made every part of them with his own hands; I believe they were very good, and at any rate the churches in the country about took them from him as fast as he could make them. He had one in his own house, and it was fine to see him as he sat before it, with his long, tremulous hands outstretched to the keys, his noble head thrown back and his sensitive face lifted in the rapture of his music. He was a rarely intelligent creature, and an artist in every fibre; and if you did not quarrel with his manifold perversities, he was a delightful companion.

After my friend went away I fell much to him for society, and we took long, rambling walks together, or sat on the stoop before his door, or lounged over the books in the drug-store, and talked evermore of literature. He must have been nearly three times my age, but that did not matter; we met in the equality of the ideal world where there is neither old nor young, any more than there is rich or poor. He had read a great deal, but of all he had read he liked Dickens best, and was always coming back to him with affection, whenever the talk strayed. He could not make me out when I criticised the style of Dickens; and when I praised Thackeray's style to the disadvantage of Dickens's he could only accuse me of a sort of æsthetic snobbishness in my preference. Dickens, he said, was for the million, and Thackeray was for the upper ten thousand. His view amused me at the time, and yet I am not sure that it was altogether mistaken.

There is certainly a property in Thackeray that somehow flatters the reader into the belief that he is better than other people. I do not mean to say that

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this was why I thought him a finer writer than Dickens, but I will own that it was probably one of the reasons why I liked him better; if I appreciated him so fully as I felt, I must be of a finer porcelain than the earthen pots which were not aware of any particular difference in the various liquors poured into them. In Dickens the virtue of his social defect is that he never appeals to the principle which sniffs, in his reader. The base of his work is the whole breadth and depth of humanity itself. It is helplessly elemental, but it is not the less grandly so, and if it deals with the simpler manifestations of character, character affected by the interests and passions rather than the tastes and preferences, it certainly deals with the larger moods through them. I do not know that in the whole range of his work he once suffers us to feel our superiority to a fellow-creature through any social accident, or except for some moral cause. This makes him very fit reading for a boy, and I should say that a boy could get only good from him. His view of the world and of society, though it was very little philosophized, was instinctively sane and reasonable, even when it was most impossible.

We are just beginning to discern that certain conceptions of our relations to our fellow-men, once formulated in generalities which met with a dramatic acceptance from the world, and were then rejected by it as mere rhetoric, have really a vital truth in them, and that if they have ever seemed false it was because of the false conditions in which we still live. Equality and fraternity, these are the ideals which once moved the world, and then fell into despite and mockery, as unrealities; but now they assert themselves in our hearts once more.

Blindly, unwittingly, erringly as Dickens often urged them, these ideals mark the whole tendency of

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his fiction, and they are what endear him to the heart, and will keep him dear to it long after many a cunning artificer in letters has passed into forgetfulness. I do not pretend that I perceived the full scope of his books, but I was aware of it in the finer sense which is not consciousness. While I read him, I was in a world where the right came out best, as I believe it will yet do in this world, and where merit was crowned with the success which I believe will yet attend it in our daily life, untrammelled by social convention or economic circumstance. In that world of his, in the ideal world, to which the real world must finally conform itself, I dwelt among the shows of things, but under a Providence that governed all things to a good end, and where neither wealth nor birth could avail against virtue or right. Of course it was in a way all crude enough, and was already contradicted by experience in the small sphere of my own being; but nevertheless it was true with that truth which is at the bottom of things, and I was happy in it. I could not fail to love the mind which conceived it, and my worship of Dickens was more grateful than that I had yet given any writer. I did not establish with him that one-sided understanding which I had with Cervantes and Shakespeare; with a contemporary that was not possible, and as an American I was deeply hurt at the things he had said against us, and the more hurt because I felt that they were often so just. But I was for the time entirely his, and I could not have wished to write like any one else.

I do not pretend that the spell I was under was wholly of a moral or social texture. For the most part I was charmed with him because he was a delightful story-teller; because he could thrill me, and make me hot and cold; because he could make me laugh and cry,

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and stop my pulse and breath at will. There seemed an inexhaustible source of humor and pathos in his work, which I now find choked and dry; I cannot laugh any more at Pickwick or Sam Weller, or weep for little Nell or Paul Dombey; their jokes, their griefs, seemed to me to be turned on, and to have a mechanical action. But beneath all is still the strong drift of a genuine emotion, a sympathy, deep and sincere, with the poor, the lowly, the unfortunate. In all that vast range of fiction, there is nothing that tells for the strong, because they are strong, against the weak, nothing that tells for the haughty against the humble, nothing that tells for wealth against poverty. The effect of Dickens is purely democratic, and however contemptible he found our pseudo-equality, he was more truly democratic than any American who had yet written fiction. I suppose it was our instinctive perception in the region of his instinctive expression, that made him so dear to us, and wounded our silly vanity so keenly through our love when he told us the truth about our horrible sham of a slave-based freedom. But at any rate the democracy is there in his work more than he knew perhaps, or would ever have known, or ever recognized by his own life. In fact, when one comes to read the story of his life, and to know that he was really and lastingly ashamed of having once put up shoe-blackening as a boy, and was unable to forgive his mother for suffering him to be so degraded, one perceives that he too was the slave of conventions and the victim of conditions which it is the highest function of his fiction to help destroy.

I imagine that my early likes and dislikes in Dickens were not very discriminating. I liked *David Copperfield*, and *Barnaby Rudge*, and *Bleak House*, and I still like them; but I do not think I liked them more than *Dombey & Son*, and *Nicholas Nickleby*, and the

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*Pickwick Papers*, which I cannot read now with any sort of patience, not to speak of pleasure. I liked *Martin Chuzzlewit*, too, and the other day I read a great part of it again, and found it roughly true in the passages that referred to America, though it was surcharged in the serious moods, and caricatured in the comic. The English are always inadequate observers; they seem too full of themselves to have eyes and ears for any alien people; but as far as an Englishman could, Dickens had caught the look of our life in certain aspects. His report of it was clumsy and farcical; but in a large, loose way it was like enough; at least he had caught the note of our self-satisfied, intolerant, and hypocritical provinciality, and this was not altogether lost in his mocking horse-play.

I cannot make out that I was any the less fond of Dickens because of it. I believe I was rather more willing to accept it as a faithful portraiture than I should be now; and I certainly never made any question of it with my friend the organ-builder. *Martin Chuzzlewit* was a favorite book with him, and so was the *Old Curiosity Shop*. No doubt a fancied affinity with Tom Pinch through their common love of music made him like that most sentimental and improbable personage, whom he would have disowned and laughed to scorn if he had met him in life; but it was a purely altruistic sympathy that he felt with Little Nell and her grandfather. He was fond of reading the pathetic passages from both books, and I can still hear his rich, vibrant voice as it lingered in tremulous emotion on the periods he loved. He would catch the volume up anywhere, any time, and begin to read, at the book-store, or the harness-shop, or the law-office, it did not matter in the wide leisure of a country village, in those days before the war, when



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people had all the time there was; and he was sure of his audience as long as he chose to read. One Christmas eve, in answer to a general wish, he read the *Christmas Carol* in the Court-house, and people came from all about to hear him.

He was an invalid and he died long since, ending a life of suffering in the saddest way. Several years before his death money fell to his family, and he went with them to an Eastern city, where he tried in vain to make himself at home. He never ceased to pine for the village he had left, with its old companionships, its easy usages, its familiar faces; and he escaped to it again and again, till at last every tie was severed, and he could come back no more. He was never reconciled to the change, and in a manner he did really die of the homesickness which deepened an hereditary taint, and enfeebled him to the disorder that carried him off. My memories of Dickens remain mingled with my memories of this quaint and most original genius, and though I knew Dickens long before I knew his lover, I can scarcely think of one without thinking of the other.



## XVI

WORDSWORTH, LOWELL, CHAUCER

CERTAIN other books I associate with another pathetic nature, of whom the organ-builder and I were both fond. This was the young poet who looked after the book half of the village drug and book store, and who wrote poetry in such leisure as he found from his duties, and with such strength as he found in the disease preying upon him. He must have been far gone in consumption when I first knew him, for I have no recollection of a time when his voice was not faint and husky, his sweet smile wan, and his blue eyes dull with the disease that wasted him away,

“Like wax in the fire,  
Like snow in the sun.”

People spoke of him as once strong and vigorous, but I recall him fragile and pale, gentle, patient, knowing his inexorable doom, and not hoping or seeking to escape it. As the end drew near he left his employment and went home to the farm, some twenty miles away, where I drove out to see him once through the deep snow of a winter which was to be his last. My heart was heavy all the time, but he tried to make the visit pass cheerfully with our wonted talk about books. Only at parting, when he took my hand in his thin, cold clasp, he said, “I suppose my disease is progressing,” with the patience he always showed.

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I did not see him again, and I am not sure now that his gift was very distinct or very great. It was slight and graceful rather, I fancy, and if he had lived it might not have sufficed to make him widely known, but he had a real and a very delicate sense of beauty in literature, and I believe it was through sympathy with his preferences that I came into appreciation of several authors whom I had not known, or had not cared for before. There could not have been many shelves of books in that store, and I came to be pretty well acquainted with them all before I began to buy them. For the most part, I do not think it occurred to me that they were there to be sold; for this pale poet seemed indifferent to the commercial property in them, and only to wish me to like them.

I am not sure, but I think it was through some volume which I found in his charge that I first came to know of De Quincey; he was fond of Dr. Holmes's poetry; he loved Whittier and Longfellow, each represented in his slender stock by some distinctive work. There were several stray volumes of Thackeray's minor writings, and I still have the *Yellowplush Papers* in the smooth red cloth (now pretty well tattered) of Appleton's Popular Library, which I bought there. But most of the books were in the famous old brown cloth of Ticknor & Fields, which was a warrant of excellence in the literature it covered. Besides these there were standard volumes of poetry, published by Phillips & Sampson, from worn-out plates; for a birthday present my mother got me Wordsworth in this shape, and I am glad to think that I once read the "Excursion" in it, for I do not think I could do so now, and I have a feeling that it is very right and fit to have read the "Excursion." To be honest, it was very hard reading even then, and I cannot truthfully pretend

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that I have ever liked Wordsworth except in parts, though for the matter of that, I do not suppose that any one ever did. I tried hard enough to like everything in him, for I had already learned enough to know that I ought to like him, and that if I did not, it was a proof of intellectual and moral inferiority in me. My early idol, Pope, had already been tumbled into the dust by Lowell, whose lectures on English Poetry had lately been given in Boston, and had met with my rapturous acceptance in such newspaper report as I had of them. So, my preoccupations were all in favor of the Lake School, and it was both in my will and my conscience to like Wordsworth. If I did not do so it was not my fault, and the fault remains very much what it first was.

I feel and understand him more deeply than I did then, but I do not think that I then failed of the meaning of much that I read in him, and I am sure that my senses were quick to all the beauty in him. After suffering once through the "Excursion" I did not afflict myself with it again, but there were other poems of his which I read over and over, as I fancy it is the habit of every lover of poetry to do with the pieces he is fond of. Still, I do not make out that Wordsworth was ever a passion of mine; on the other hand, neither was Byron. Him, too, I liked in passages and in certain poems which I knew before I read Wordsworth at all; I read him throughout, but I did not try to imitate him, and I did not try to imitate Wordsworth.

Those lectures of Lowell's had a great influence with me, and I tried to like whatever they bade me like, after a fashion common to young people when they begin to read criticisms; their æsthetic pride is touched; they wish to realize that they too can feel the fine things the critic admires. From this motive they

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do a great deal of factitious liking; but after all the affections will not be bidden, and the critic can only avail to give a point of view, to enlighten a perspective. When I read Lowell's praises of him, I had all the will in the world to read Spencer, and I really meant to do so, but I have not done so to this day, and as often as I have tried I have found it impossible. It was not so with Chaucer, whom I loved from the first word of his which I found quoted in those lectures, and in Chambers's *Encyclopædia of English Literature*, which I had borrowed of my friend the organ-builder.

In fact, I may fairly class Chaucer among my passions, for I read him with that sort of personal attachment I had for Cervantes, who resembled him in a certain sweet and cheery humanity. But I do not allege this as the reason, for I had the same feeling for Pope, who was not like either of them. Kissing goes by favor, in literature as in life, and one cannot quite account for one's passions in either; what is certain is, I liked Chaucer and I did not like Spencer; possibly there was an affinity between reader and poet, but if there was I should be at a loss to name it, unless it was the liking for reality, and the sense of mother earth in human life. By the time I had read all of Chaucer that I could find in the various collections and criticisms, my father had been made a clerk in the legislature, and on one of his visits home he brought me the poet's works from the State Library, and I set about reading them with a glossary. It was not easy, but it brought strength with it, and lifted my heart with a sense of noble companionship.

I will not pretend that I was insensible to the grossness of the poet's time, which I found often enough in the poet's verse, as well as the goodness of his nature, and my father seems to have felt a certain mis-

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giving about it. He repeated to me the librarian's question as to whether he thought he ought to put an unexpurgated edition in the hands of a boy, and his own answer that he did not believe it would hurt me. It was a kind of appeal to me to make the event justify him, and I suppose he had not given me the book without due reflection. Probably he reasoned that with my greed for all manner of literature the bad would become known to me along with the good at any rate, and I had better know that he knew it.

The streams of filth flow down through the ages in literature, which sometimes seems little better than an open sewer, and, as I have said, I do not see why the time should not come when the noxious and noisome channels should be stopped; but the base of the mind is bestial, and so far the beast in us has insisted upon having his full say. The worst of lewd literature is that it seems to give a sanction to lewdness in the life, and that inexperience takes this effect for reality: that is the danger and the harm, and I think the fact ought not to be blinked. Compared with the meaner poets the greater are the cleaner, and Chaucer was probably safer than any other English poet of his time, but I am not going to pretend that there are not things in Chaucer which a boy would be the better for not reading; and so far as these words of mine shall be taken for counsel, I am not willing that they should unqualifiedly praise him. The matter is by no means simple; it is not easy to conceive of a means of purifying the literature of the past without weakening it, and even falsifying it, but it is best to own that it is in all respects just what it is, and not to feign it otherwise. I am not ready to say that the harm from it is positive, but you do get smeared with it, and the filthy thought lives with the filthy rhyme in the ear, even



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when it does not corrupt the heart or make it seem a light thing for the reader's tongue and pen to sin in kind.

I loved my Chancer too well, I hope, not to get some good from the best in him; and my reading of criticism had taught me how and where to look for the best, and to know it when I had found it. Of course I began to copy him. That is, I did not attempt anything like his tales in kind; they must have seemed too hopelessly far away in taste and time, but I studied his verse, and imitated a stanza which I found in some of his things and had not found elsewhere; I rejoiced in the freshness and sweetness of his diction, and though I felt that his structure was obsolete, there was in his wording something homelier and heartier than the imported analogues that had taken the place of the phrases he used.

I began to employ in my own work the archaic words that I fancied most, which was futile and foolish enough, and I formed a preference for the simpler Anglo-Saxon woof of our speech, which was not so bad. Of course, being left so much as I was to my own whim in such things, I could not keep a just mean; I had an aversion for the Latin derivatives which was nothing short of a craze. Some half-bred critic whom I had read made me believe that English could be written without them, and had better be written so, and I did not escape from this lamentable error until I had produced with weariness and vexation of spirit several pieces of prose wholly composed of monosyllables. I suspect now that I did not always stop to consider whether my short words were not as Latin by race as any of the long words I rejected, and that I only made sure they were short.

The frivolous ingenuity which wasted itself in this exercise happily could not hold out long, and in verse it was pretty well helpless from the beginning. Yet



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I will not altogether blame it, for it made me know, as nothing else could, the resources of our tongue in that sort; and in the revolt from the slavish bondage I took upon myself I did not go so far as to plunge into any very wild polysyllabic excesses. I still like the little word if it says the thing I want to say as well as the big one, but I honor above all the word that says the thing. At the same time I confess that I have a prejudice against certain words that I cannot overcome; the sight of some offends me, the sound of others, and rather than use one of those detested vocables, even when I perceive that it would convey my exact meaning, I would cast about long for some other. I think this is a foible, and a disadvantage, but I do not deny it.

An author who had much to do with preparing me for the quixotic folly in point was that Thomas Babington Macaulay, who taught simplicity of diction in phrases of as "learned length and thundering sound," as any he would have had me shun, and who deplored the Latinistic English of Johnson in terms emulous of the great doctor's rotundity and ponderosity. I wonder now that I did not see how my physician avoided his medicine, but I did not, and I went on to spend myself in an endeavor as vain and senseless as any that pedantry has conceived. It was none the less absurd because I believed in it so devoutly, and sacrificed myself to it with such infinite pains and labor. But this was long after I read Macaulay, who was one of my grand passions before Dickens or Chaucer.

## XVII

### MACAULAY

ONE of the many characters of the village was the machinist who had his shop under our printing-office when we first brought our newspaper to the place, and who was just then a machinist because he was tired of being many other things, and had not yet made up his mind what he should be next. He could have been whatever he turned his agile intellect and his cunning hand to; he had been a schoolmaster and a watch-maker, and I believe an amateur doctor and irregular lawyer; he talked and wrote brilliantly, and he was one of the group that nightly disposed of every manner of theoretical and practical question at the drug-store; it was quite indifferent to him which side he took; what he enjoyed was the mental exercise. He was in consumption, as so many were in that region, and he carbonized against it, as he said; he took his carbon in the liquid form, and the last time I saw him the carbon had finally prevailed over the consumption, but it had itself become a seated vice; that was many years since, and it is many years since he died.

He must have been known to me earlier, but I remember him first as he swam vividly into my ken, with a volume of Macaulay's essays in his hand, one day. Less figuratively speaking, he came up into the printing-office to expose from the book the nefarious plagiarism of an editor in a neighboring city, who had adapted

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with the change of names and a word or two here and there, whole passages from the essay on Barère, to the denunciation of a brother editor. It was a very simple-hearted fraud, and it was all done with an innocent trust in the popular ignorance which now seems to me a little pathetic; but it was certainly very barefaced, and merited the public punishment which the discoverer inflicted by means of what journalists call the deadly parallel column. The effect ought logically to have been ruinous for the plagiarist, but it was really nothing of the kind. He simply ignored the exposure, and the comments of the other city papers, and in the process of time he easily lived down the memory of it and went on to greater usefulness in his profession.

But for the moment it appeared to me a tremendous crisis, and I listened as the minister of justice read his communication, with a thrill which lost itself in the interest I suddenly felt in the plundered author. Those facile and brilliant phrases and ideas struck me as the finest things I had yet known in literature, and I borrowed the book and read it through. Then I borrowed another volume of Macaulay's essays, and another and another, till I had read them every one. It was like a long debauch, from which I emerged with regret that it should ever end.

I tried other essayists, other critics, whom the machinist had in his library, but it was useless; neither Sidney Smith nor Thomas Carlyle could console me; I sighed for more Macaulay and evermore Macaulay. I read his *History of England*, and I could measurably console myself with that, but only measurably; and I could not go back to the essays and read them again, for it seemed to me I had absorbed them so thoroughly that I had left nothing unenjoyed in them. I used to

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talk with the machinist about them, and with the organ-builder, and with my friend the printer, but no one seemed to feel the intense fascination in them that I did, and that I should now be quite unable to account for.

Once more I had an author for whom I could feel a personal devotion, whom I could dream of and dote upon, and whom I could offer my intimacy in many an impassioned revery. I do not think T. B. Macaulay would really have liked it; I dare say he would not have valued the friendship of the sort of a youth I was, but in the conditions he was helpless, and I poured out my love upon him without a rebuff. Of course I reformed my prose style, which had been carefully modelled upon that of Goldsmith and Irving, and began to write in the manner of Macaulay, in short, quick sentences, and with the prevalent use of brief Anglo-Saxon words, which he prescribed, but did not practise. As for his notions of literature, I simply accepted them with the feeling that any question of them would have been little better than blasphemy.

For a long time he spoiled my taste for any other criticism; he made it seem pale, and poor, and weak; and he blunted my sense to subtler excellences than I found in him. I think this was a pity, but it was a thing not to be helped, like a great many things that happen to our hurt in life; it was simply inevitable. How or when my frenzy for him began to abate I cannot say, but it certainly waned, and it must have waned rapidly, for after no great while I found myself feeling the charm of quite different minds, as fully as if his had never enslaved me. I cannot regret that I enjoyed him so keenly as I did; it was in a way a generous delight, and though he swayed me helplessly whatever way he thought, I do not think yet that he

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swayed me in any very wrong way. He was a bright and clear intelligence, and if his light did not go far, it is to be said of him that his worst fault was only to have stopped short of the finest truth in art, in morals, in politics.

## XVIII

### CRITICS AND REVIEWS

WHAT remained to me from my love of Macaulay was a love of criticism, and I read almost as much in criticism as I read in poetry and history and fiction. It was of an eccentric doctor, another of the village characters, that I got the works of Edgar A. Poe; I do not know just how, but it must have been in some exchange of books; he preferred metaphysics. At any rate I fell greedily upon them, and I read with no less zest than his poems the bitter, and cruel, and narrow-minded criticisms which mainly filled one of the volumes. As usual, I accepted them implicitly, and it was not till long afterwards that I understood how worthless they were.

I think that hardly less immoral than the lubricity of literature, and its celebration of the monkey and the goat in us, is the spectacle such criticism affords of the tigerish play of satire. It is monstrous that for no offence but the wish to produce something beautiful, and the mistake of his powers in that direction, a writer should become the prey of some ferocious wit, and that his tormentor should achieve credit by his lightness and ease in rending his prey; it is shocking to think how alluring and depraving the fact is to the young reader emulous of such credit, and eager to achieve it. Because I admired these barbarities of Poe's, I wished to imitate them, to spit some hapless victim on my own



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spear, to make him suffer and to make the reader laugh. This is as far as possible from the criticism that enlightens and ennobles, but it is still the ideal of most critics, deny it as they will; and because it is the ideal of most critics criticism still remains behind all the other literary arts.

I am glad to remember that at the same time I exulted in these ferocities I had mind enough and heart enough to find pleasure in the truer and finer work, the humaner work of other writers, like Hazlitt, and Leigh Hunt, and Lamb, which became known to me at a date I cannot exactly fix. I believe it was Hazlitt whom I read first, and he helped me to clarify and formulate my admiration of Shakespeare as no one else had yet done; Lamb helped me too, and with all the dramatists, and on every hand I was reaching out for light that should enable me to place in literary history the authors I knew and loved.

I fancy it was well for me at this period to have got at the four great English reviews, the *Edinburgh*, the *Westminster*, the *London Quarterly*, and the *North British*, which I read regularly, as well as *Blackwood's Magazine*. We got them in the American editions in payment for printing the publisher's prospectus, and their arrival was an excitement, a joy, and a satisfaction with me, which I could not now describe without having to accuse myself of exaggeration. The love of literature, and the hope of doing something in it, had become my life to the exclusion of all other interests, or it was at least the great reality, and all other things were as shadows. I was living in a time of high political tumult, and I certainly cared very much for the question of slavery which was then filling the minds of men; I felt deeply the shame and wrong of our Fugitive Slave Law; I was stirred by the news from Kansas, where the great

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struggle between the two great principles in our nationality was beginning in bloodshed ; but I cannot pretend that any of these things were more than ripples on the surface of my intense and profound interest in literature. If I was not to live by it, I was somehow to live for it.

If I thought of taking up some other calling it was as a means only ; literature was always the end I had in view, immediately or finally. I did not see how it was to yield me a living, for I knew that almost all the literary men in the country had other professions ; they were editors, lawyers, or had public or private employments ; or they were men of wealth ; there was then not one who earned his bread solely by his pen in fiction, or drama, or history, or poetry, or criticism, in a day when people wanted very much less butter on their bread than they do now. But I kept blindly at my studies, and yet not altogether blindly, for, as I have said, the reading I did had more tendency than before, and I was beginning to see authors in their proportion to one another, and to the body of literature.

The English reviews were of great use to me in this ; I made a rule of reading each one of them quite through. To be sure I often broke this rule, as people are apt to do with rules of the kind ; it was not possible for a boy to wade through heavy articles relating to English politics and economics, but I do not think I left any paper upon a literary topic unread, and I did read enough politics, especially in *Blackwood's*, to be of Tory opinions ; they were very fit opinions for a boy, and they did not exact of me any change in regard to the slavery question.

## XIX

### A NON-LITERARY EPISODE

I SUPPOSE I might almost class my devotion to English reviews among my literary passions, but it was of very short lease, not beyond a year or two at the most. In the midst of it I made my first and only essay aside from the lines of literature, or rather wholly apart from it. After some talk with my father it was decided, mainly by myself, I suspect, that I should leave the printing-office and study law; and it was arranged with the United States Senator who lived in our village, and who was at home from Washington for the summer, that I was to come into his office. The Senator was by no means to undertake my instruction himself; his nephew, who had just begun to read law, was to be my fellow-student, and we were to keep each other up to the work, and to recite to each other, until we thought we had enough law to go before a board of attorneys and test our fitness for admission to the bar.

This was the custom in that day and place, as I suppose it is still in most parts of the country. We were to be fitted for practice in the courts, not only by our reading, but by a season of pettifogging before justices of the peace, which I looked forward to with no small shrinking of my shy spirit; but what really troubled me most, and was always the grain of sand between my teeth, was Blackstone's confession of his own original preference for literature, and his perception that the

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law was "a jealous mistress," who would suffer no rival in his affections. I agreed with him that I could not go through life with a divided interest; I must give up literature or I must give up law. I not only consented to this logically, but I realized it in my attempt to carry on the reading I had loved, and to keep at the efforts I was always making to write something in verse or prose, at night, after studying law all day. The strain was great enough when I had merely the work in the printing-office; but now I came home from my Blackstone mentally fagged, and I could not take up the authors whom at the bottom of my heart I loved so much better. I tried it a month, but almost from the fatal day when I found that confession of Blackstone's, my whole being turned from the "jealous mistress" to the high-minded muses.

I had not only to go back to literature, but I had also to go back to the printing-office. I did not regret it, but I had made my change of front in the public eye, and I felt that it put me at a certain disadvantage with my fellow-citizens; as for the Senator, whose office I had forsaken, I met him now and then in the street, without trying to detain him, and once when he came to the printing-office for his paper we encountered at a point where we could not help speaking. He looked me over in my general effect of base mechanical, and asked me if I had given up the law; I had only to answer him I had, and our conference ended.

It was a terrible moment for me, because I knew that in his opinion I had chosen a path in life, which if it did not lead to the Poor House was at least no way to the White House. I suppose now that he thought I had merely gone back to my trade, and so for the time I had; but I have no reason to suppose

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that he judged my case narrow-mindedly, and I ought to have had the courage to have the affair out with him, and tell him just why I had left the law; we had sometimes talked the English reviews over, for he read them as well as I, and it ought not to have been impossible for me to be frank with him; but as yet I could not trust any one with my secret hope of some day living for literature, although I had already lived for nothing else. I preferred the disadvantage which I must be at in his eyes, and in the eyes of most of my fellow-citizens; I believe I had the applause of the organ-builder, who thought the law no calling for me.

In that village there was a social equality which, if not absolute, was as nearly so as can ever be in a competitive civilization; and I could have suffered no slight in the general esteem for giving up a profession and going back to a trade; if I was despised at all it was because I had thrown away the chance of material advancement; I dare say some people thought I was a fool to do that. No one, indeed, could have imagined the rapture it was to do it, or what a load rolled from my shoulders when I dropped the law from them. Perhaps Sinbad or Christian could have conceived of my ecstatic relief; yet so far as the popular vision reached I was not returning to literature, but to the printing business, and I myself felt the difference. My reading had given me criterions different from those of the simple life of our village, and I did not flatter myself that my calling would have been thought one of great social dignity in the world where I hoped some day to make my living. My convictions were all democratic, but at heart I am afraid I was a snob, and was unworthy of the honest work which I ought to have felt it an honor to do; this, whatever we falsely pretend to the contrary, is the frame of every

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one who aspires beyond the work of his hands. I do not know how it had become mine, except through my reading, and I think it was through the devotion I then had for a certain author that I came to a knowledge not of good and evil so much as of common and superfine.



## XX

### THACKERAY

It was of the organ-builder that I had Thackeray's books first. He knew their literary quality, and their rank in the literary world; but I believe he was surprised at the passion I instantly conceived for them. He could not understand it; he deplored it almost as a moral defect in me; though he honored it as a proof of my critical taste. In a certain measure he was right.

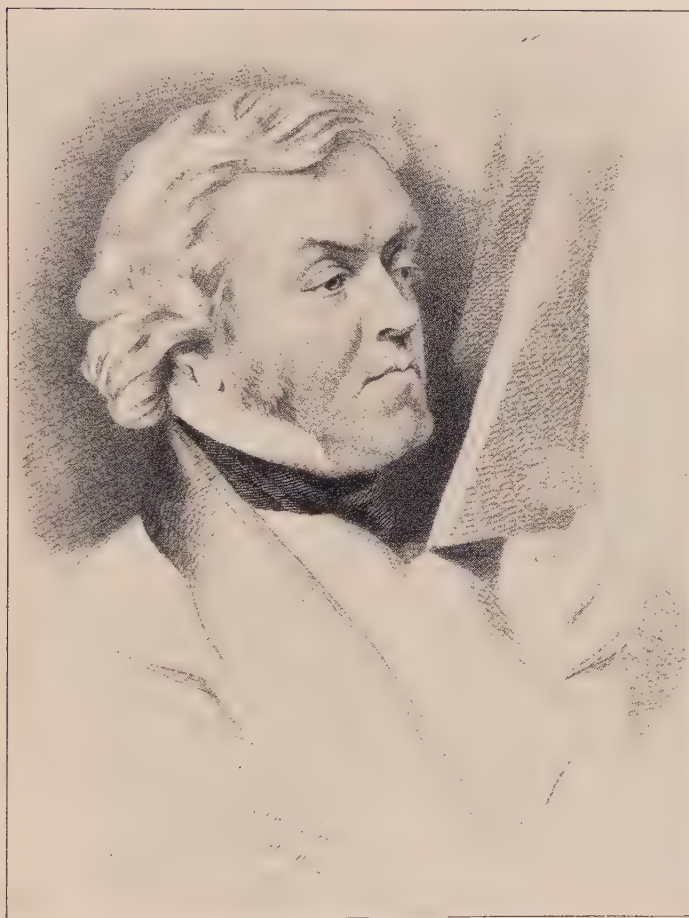
What flatters the worldly pride in a young man is what fascinates him with Thackeray. With his air of looking down on the highest, and confidentially inviting you to be of his company in the seat of the scorner he is irresistible; his very confession that he is a snob, too, is balm and solace to the reader who secretly admires the splendors he affects to despise. His sentimentality is also dear to the heart of youth, and the boy who is dazzled by his satire is melted by his easy pathos. Then, if the boy has read a good many other books, he is taken with that abundance of literary turn and allusion in Thackeray; there is hardly a sentence but reminds him that he is in the society of a great literary swell, who has read everything, and can mock or burlesque life right and left from the literature always at his command. At the same time he feels his mastery, and is abjectly grateful to him in his own simple love of the good for his patronage of the unassuming virtues. It is so pleasing to one's vanity, and so safe, to be of the

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master's side when he assails those vices and foibles which are inherent in the system of things, and which one can condemn with vast applause so long as one does not attempt to undo the conditions they spring from.

I exulted to have Thackeray attack the aristocrats, and expose their wicked pride and meanness, and I never noticed that he did not propose to do away with aristocracy, which is and must always be just what it has been, and which cannot be changed while it exists at all. He appeared to me one of the noblest creatures that ever was when he derided the shams of society; and I was far from seeing that society, as we have it, was necessarily a sham; when he made a mock of snobbishness I did not know but snobbishness was something that might be reached and cured by ridicule. Now I know that so long as we have social inequality we shall have snobs; we shall have men who bully and truckle, and women who snub and crawl. I know that it is futile to spurn them, or lash them for trying to get on in the world, and that the world is what it must be from the selfish motives which underlie our economic life. But I did not know these things then, nor for long afterwards, and so I gave my heart to Thackeray, who seemed to promise me in his contempt of the world a refuge from the shame I felt for my own want of figure in it. He had the effect of taking me into the great world, and making me a party to his splendid indifference to titles, and even to royalties; and I could not see that sham for sham he was unwittingly the greatest sham of all.

I think it was *Pendennis* I began with, and I lived in the book to the very last line of it, and made its alien circumstance mine to the smallest detail. I am still not sure but it is the author's greatest book, and I speak from a thorough acquaintance with every line



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he has written, except the *Virginians*, which I have never been able to read quite through; most of his work I have read twice, and some of it twenty times.

After reading *Pendennis* I went to *Vanity Fair*, which I now think the poorest of Thackeray's novels—crude, heavy-handed, caricatured. About the same time I revelled in the romanticism of *Henry Esmond*, with its pseudo-eighteenth-century sentiment, and its appeals to an overwrought ideal of gentlemanhood and honor. It was long before I was duly revolted by Esmond's transfer of his passion from the daughter to the mother whom he is successively enamoured of. I believe this unpleasant and preposterous affair is thought one of the fine things in the story; I do not mind owning that I thought it so myself when I was seventeen; and if I could have found a Beatrix to be in love with, and a Lady Castlewood to be in love with me, I should have asked nothing finer of fortune. The glamour of *Henry Esmond* was all the deeper because I was reading the *Spectator* then, and was constantly in the company of Addison, and Steele, and Swift, and Pope, and all the wits at Will's, who are presented evanescently in the romance. The intensely literary keeping, as well as quality, of the story I suppose is what formed its highest fascination for me; but that effect of great world which it imparts to the reader, making him citizen, and, if he will, leading citizen of it, was what helped turn my head.

This is the toxic property of all Thackeray's writing. He is himself forever dominated in imagination by the world, and even while he tells you it is not worth while he makes you feel that it is worth while. It is not the honest man, but the man of honor, who shines in his page; his meek folk are proudly meek, and there is a touch of superiority, a glint of mundane splendor,

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in his lowliest. He rails at the order of things, but he imagines nothing different, even when he shows that its baseness, and cruelty, and hypocrisy are wellnigh inevitable, and, for most of those who wish to get on in it, quite inevitable. He has a good word for the virtues, he patronizes the Christian graces, he pats humble merit on the head; he has even explosions of indignation against the insolence and pride of birth, and purse-pride. But, after all, he is of the world, worldly, and the highest hope he holds out is that you may be in the world and despise its ambitions while you compass its ends.

I should be far from blaming him for all this. He was of his time; but since his time men have thought beyond him, and seen life with a vision which makes his seem rather purblind. He must have been immensely in advance of most of the thinking and feeling of his day, for people then used to accuse his sentimental pessimism of cynical qualities which we could hardly find in it now. It was the age of intense individualism, when you were to do right because it was becoming to you, say, as a gentleman, and you were to have an eye single to the effect upon your character, if not your reputation; you were not to do a mean thing because it was wrong, but because it was mean. It was romanticism carried into the region of morals. But I had very little concern then as to that sort of error.

I was on a very high æsthetic horse, which I could not have conveniently stooped from if I had wished; it was quite enough for me that Thackeray's novels were prodigious works of art, and I acquired merit, at least with myself, for appreciating them so keenly, for liking them so much. It must be, I felt with far less consciousness than my formulation of the feeling expresses, that I was of some finer sort myself to be



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able to enjoy such a fine sort. No doubt I should have been a coxcomb of some kind, if not that kind, and I shall not be very strenuous in censuring Thackeray for his effect upon me in this way. No doubt the effect was already in me, and he did not so much produce it as find it.

In the mean time he was a vast delight to me, as much in the variety of his minor works—his *Yellowplush*, and *Letters of Mr. Brown*, and *Adventures of Major Gahagan*, and the *Paris Sketch Book*, and the *Irish Sketch Book*, and the *Great Hoggarty Diamond*, and the *Book of Snobs*, and the *English Humorists*, and the *Four Georges*, and all the multitude of his essays, and verses, and caricatures—as in the spacious designs of his huge novels, the *Newcomes*, and *Pendennis*, and *Vanity Fair*, and *Henry Esmond*, and *Barry Lyndon*.

There was something in the art of the last which seemed to me then, and still seems, the farthest reach of the author's great talent. It is couched, like so much of his work, in the autobiographic form, which next to the dramatic form is the most natural, and which lends itself with such flexibility to the purpose of the author. In *Barry Lyndon* there is imagined to the life a scoundrel of such rare quality that he never supposes for a moment but he is the finest sort of a gentleman; and so, in fact, he was, as most gentlemen went in his day. Of course, the picture is overcolored; it was the vice of Thackeray, or of Thackeray's time, to surcharge all imitations of life and character, so that a generation apparently much slower, if not duller than ours, should not possibly miss the artist's meaning. But I do not think it is so much surcharged as *Esmond*; *Barry Lyndon* is by no manner of means so conscious as that mirror of gentlemanhood, with its manifold self-

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reverberations; and for these reasons I am inclined to think he is the most perfect creation of Thackeray's mind.

I did not make the acquaintance of Thackeray's books all at once, or even in rapid succession, and he at no time possessed the whole empire of my catholic, not to say, fickle, affections, during the years I was compassing a full knowledge and sense of his greatness, and burning incense at his shrine. But there was a moment when he so outshone and overtopped all other divinities in my worship that I was effectively his alone, as I have been the helpless and, as it were, hypnotized devotee of three or four others of the very great. From his art there flowed into me a literary quality which tinged my whole mental substance, and made it impossible for me to say, or wish to say, anything without giving it the literary color. That is, while he dominated my love and fancy, if I had been so fortunate as to have a simple concept of anything in life, I must have tried to give the expression of it some turn or tint that would remind the reader of books even before it reminded him of men.

It is hard to make out what I mean, but this is a try at it, and I do not know that I shall be able to do better unless I add that Thackeray, of all the writers that I have known, is the most thoroughly and profoundly imbued with literature, so that when he speaks it is not with words and blood, but with words and ink. You may read the greatest part of Dickens, as you may read the greatest part of Hawthorne or Tolstoy, and not once be reminded of literature as a business or a cult, but you can hardly read a paragraph, hardly a sentence, of Thackeray's without being reminded of it either by suggestion or downright allusion.

I do not blame him for this; he was himself, and he

## THACKERAY

could not have been any other manner of man without loss; but I say that the greatest talent is not that which breathes of the library, but that which breathes of the street, the field, the open sky, the simple earth. I began to imitate this master of mine almost as soon as I began to read him; this must be, and I had a greater pride and joy in my success than I should probably have known in anything really creative; I should have suspected that, I should have distrusted that, because I had nothing to test it by, no model; but here before me was the very finest and noblest model, and I had but to form my lines upon it, and I had produced a work of art altogether more estimable in my eyes than anything else could have been. I saw the little world about me through the lenses of my master's spectacles, and I reported its facts, in his tone and his attitude, with his self-flattered scorn, his showy sighs, his facile satire. I need not say I was perfectly satisfied with the result, or that to be able to imitate Thackeray was a much greater thing for me than to have been able to imitate nature. In fact, I could have valued any picture of the life and character I knew only as it put me in mind of life and character as these had shown themselves to me in his books.

## XXI

### "LAZARILLO DE TORMES"

AT the same time, I was not only reading many books besides Thackeray's, but I was studying to get a smattering of several languages as well as I could, with or without help. I could now manage Spanish fairly well, and I was sending on to New York for authors in that tongue. I do not remember how I got the money to buy them; to be sure it was no great sum; but it must have been given me out of the sums we were all working so hard to make up for the debt, and the interest on the debt (that is always the wicked pinch for the debtor!), we had incurred in the purchase of the newspaper which we lived by, and the house which we lived in. I spent no money on any other sort of pleasure, and so, I suppose, it was afforded me the more readily; but I cannot really recall the history of those acquisitions on its financial side. In any case, if the sums I laid out in literature could not have been comparatively great, the excitement attending the outlay was prodigious.

I know that I used to write on to Messrs. Roe Lockwood & Son, New York, for my Spanish books, and I dare say that my letters were sufficiently pedantic, and filled with a simulated acquaintance with all Spanish literature. Heaven knows what they must have thought, if they thought anything, of their queer customer in that obscure little Ohio village; but he could not have

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been queerer to them than to his fellow-villagers, I am sure. I haunted the post-office about the time the books were due, and when I found one of them in our deep box among a heap of exchange newspapers and business letters, my emotion was so great that it almost took my breath. I hurried home with the precious volume, and shut myself into my little den, where I gave myself up to a sort of transport in it. These books were always from the collection of Spanish authors published by Baudry in Paris, and they were in saffron-colored paper covers, printed full of a perfectly intoxicating catalogue of other Spanish books which I meant to read, every one, some time. The paper and the ink had a certain odor which was sweeter to me than the perfumes of Araby. The look of the type took me more than the glance of a girl, and I had a fever of longing to know the heart of the book, which was like a lover's passion. Sometimes I did not reach its heart, but commonly I did. Moratin's *Origins of the Spanish Theatre*, and a large volume of Spanish dramatic authors, were the first Spanish books I sent for, but I could not say why I sent for them, unless it was because I saw that there were some plays of Cervantes among the rest. I read these and I read several comedies of Lope de Vega, and numbers of archaic dramas in Moratin's history, and I really got a fairish perspective of the Spanish drama, which has now almost wholly faded from my mind. It is more intelligible to me why I should have read Condé's *Dominion of the Arabs in Spain*; for that was in the line of my reading in Irving, which would account for my pleasure in the *History of the Civil Wars of Granada*; it was some time before I realized that the chronicles in this were a bundle of romances and not veritable records; and my whole study in these things was wholly undirected and unenlightened. But I meant



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to be thorough in it, and I could not rest satisfied with the Spanish-English grammars I had; I was not willing to stop short of the official grammar of the Spanish Academy. I sent to New York for it, and my booksellers there reported that they would have to send to Spain for it. I lived till it came to hand through them from Madrid; and I do not understand why I did not perish then from the pride and joy I had in it.

But, after all, I am not a Spanish scholar, and can neither speak nor write the language. I never got more than a good reading use of it, perhaps because I never really tried for more. But I am very glad of that, because it has been a great pleasure to me, and even some profit, and it has lighted up many meanings in literature, which must always have remained dark to me. Not to speak now of the modern Spanish writers whom it has enabled me to know in their own houses as it were, I had even in that remote day a rapturous delight in a certain Spanish book, which was well worth all the pains I had undergone to get at it. This was the famous picaresque novel, *Lazarillo de Tormes*, by Hurtado de Mendoza, whose name then so familiarized itself to my fondness that now as I write it I feel as if it were that of an old personal friend whom I had known in the flesh. I believe it would not have been always comfortable to know Mendoza outside of his books; he was rather a terrible person; he was one of the Spanish invaders of Italy, and is known in Italian history as the Tyrant of Siena. But at my distance of time and place I could safely revel in his friendship, and as an author I certainly found him a most charming companion. The adventures of his rogue of a hero, who began life as the servant and accomplice of a blind beggar, and then adventured on through a most divert-



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ing career of knavery, brought back the atmosphere of *Don Quixote*, and all the landscape of that dear wonder-world of Spain, where I had lived so much; and I followed him with all the old delight.

I do not know that I should counsel others to do so, or that the general reader would find his account in it, but I am sure that the intending author of American fiction would do well to study the Spanish picaresque novels; for in their simplicity of design he will find one of the best forms for an American story. The intrigue of close texture will never suit our conditions, which are so loose and open and variable; each man's life among us is a romance of the Spanish model, if it is the life of a man who has risen, as we nearly all have, with many ups and downs. The story of *Lazarillo* is gross in its facts, and is mostly “unmeet for ladies,” like most of the fiction in all languages before our times; but there is an honest simplicity in the narration, a pervading humor, and a rich feeling for character that gives it value.

I think that a good deal of its foulness was lost upon me, but I certainly understood that it would not do to present it to an American public just as it was, in the translation which I presently planned to make. I went about telling the story to people, and trying to make them find it as amusing as I did, but whether I ever succeeded I cannot say, though the notion of a version with modifications constantly grew with me, till one day I went to the city of Cleveland with my father. There was a branch house of an Eastern firm of publishers in that place, and I must have had the hope that I might have the courage to propose a translation of *Lazarillo* to them. My father urged me to try my fortune, but my heart failed me. I was half blind with one of the headaches that tormented me in

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those days, and I turned my sick eyes from the sign, "J. P. Jewett & Co., Publishers," which held me fascinated, and went home without at least having my much-dreamed-of version of *Lazarillo* refused.

## XXII

CURTIS, LONGFELLOW, SCHLEGEL

I AM quite at a loss to know why my reading had this direction or that in those days. It had necessarily passed beyond my father's suggestion, and I think it must have been largely by accident or experiment that I read one book rather than another. He made some sort of newspaper arrangement with a book-store in Cleveland, which was the means of enriching our home library with a goodly number of books, shop-worn, but none the worse for that, and new in the only way that books need be new to the lover of them. Among these I found a treasure in Curtis's two books, the *Nile Notes of a Howadji*, and the *Howadji in Syria*. I already knew him by his *Potiphar Papers*, and the ever-delightful reveries which have since gone under the name of *Prue and I*; but those books of Eastern travel opened a new world of thinking and feeling. They had at once a great influence upon me. The smooth richness of their diction; the amiable sweetness of their mood, their gracious caprice, the delicacy of their satire (which was so kind that it should have some other name), their abundance of light and color, and the deep heart of humanity underlying their airiest fantasticality, all united in an effect which was different from any I had yet known.

As usual, I steeped myself in them, and the first runnings of my fancy when I began to pour it out after-

## MY LITERARY PASSIONS

wards were of their flavor. I tried to write like this new master; but whether I had tried or not, I should probably have done so from the love I bore him. He was a favorite not only of mine, but of all the young people in the village who were reading current literature, so that on this ground at least I had abundant sympathy. The present generation can have little notion of the deep impression made upon the intelligence and conscience of the whole nation by the *Potiphar Papers*, or how its fancy was rapt with the *Prue and I* sketches. These are among the most veritable literary successes we have had, and probably we who were so glad when the author of these beautiful things turned aside from the flowery paths where he led us, to battle for freedom in the field of politics, would have felt the sacrifice too great if we could have dreamed it would be life-long. But, as it was, we could only honor him the more, and give him a place in our hearts which he shared with Longfellow.

This divine poet I have never ceased to read. His *Hiawatha* was a new book during one of those terrible Lake Shore winters, but all the other poems were old friends with me by that time. With a sister who is no longer living I had a peculiar affection for his pretty and touching and lightly humorous tale of *Kavanagh*, which was of a village life enough like our own, in some things, to make us know the truth of its delicate realism. We used to read it and talk it fondly over together, and I believe some stories of like make and manner grew out of our pleasure in it. They were never finished, but it was enough to begin them, and there were few writers, if any, among those I delighted in who escaped the tribute of an imitation. One has to begin that way, or at least one had in my day; perhaps it is now possible for a young writer to begin by being

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himself; but for my part, that was not half so important as to be like some one else. Literature, not life, was my aim, and to reproduce it was my joy and my pride.

I was widening my knowledge of it helplessly and involuntarily, and I was always chancing upon some book that served this end among the great number of books that I read merely for my pleasure without any real result of the sort. Schlegel's *Lectures on Dramatic Literature* came into my hands not long after I had finished my studies in the history of the Spanish theatre, and it made the whole subject at once luminous. I cannot give a due notion of the comfort this book afforded me by the light it cast upon paths where I had dimly made my way before, but which I now followed in the full day.

Of course, I pinned my faith to everything that Schlegel said. I obediently despised the classic unities and the French and Italian theatre which had perpetuated them, and I revered the romantic drama which had its glorious course among the Spanish and English poets, and which was crowned with the fame of the Cervantes and the Shakespeare whom I seemed to own, they owned me so completely. It vexes me now to find that I cannot remember how the book came into my hands, or who could have suggested it to me. It is possible that it may have been that artist who came and stayed a month with us while she painted my mother's portrait. She was fresh from her studies in New York, where she had met authors and artists at the house of the Carey sisters, and had even once seen my adored Curtis somewhere, though she had not spoken with him. Her talk about these things simply emparadised me; it lifted me into a heaven of hope that I, too, might some day meet such elect spirits and con-

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verse with them face to face. My mood was sufficiently foolish, but it was not such a frame of mind as I can be ashamed of; and I could wish a boy no happier fortune than to possess it for a time, at least.



## XXIII

TENNYSON

I CANNOT quite see now how I found time for even trying to do the things I had in hand more or less. It is perfectly clear to me that I did none of them well, though I meant at the time to do none of them other than excellently. I was attempting the study of no less than four languages, and I presently added a fifth to these. I was reading right and left in every direction, but chiefly in that of poetry, criticism, and fiction. From time to time I boldly attacked a history, and carried it by a *coup de main*, or sat down before it for a prolonged siege. There was occasionally an author who worsted me, whom I tried to read and quietly gave up after a vain struggle, but I must say that these authors were few. I had got a very fair notion of the range of all literature, and the relations of the different literatures to one another, and I knew pretty well what manner of book it was that I took up before I committed myself to the task of reading it. Always I read for pleasure, for the delight of knowing something more; and this pleasure is a very different thing from amusement, though I read a great deal for mere amusement, as I do still, and to take my mind away from unhappy or harassing thoughts. There are very few things that I think it a waste of time to have read; I should probably have wasted the time if I had not read them, and at the period I speak of I do not think I wasted much time.

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My day began about seven o'clock, in the printing-office, where it took me till noon to do my task of so many thousand ems, say four or five. Then we had dinner, after the simple fashion of people who work with their hands for their dinners. In the afternoon I went back and corrected the proof of the type I had set, and distributed my case for the next day. At two or three o'clock I was free, and then I went home and began my studies; or tried to write something; or read a book. We had supper at six, and after that I rejoiced in literature, till I went to bed at ten or eleven. I cannot think of any time when I did not go gladly to my books or manuscripts, when it was not a noble joy as well as a high privilege.

But it all ended as such a strain must, in the sort of break which was not yet known as nervous prostration. When I could not sleep after my studies, and the sick headaches came oftener, and then days and weeks of hypochondriacal misery, it was apparent I was not well; but that was not the day of anxiety for such things, and if it was thought best that I should leave work and study for a while, it was not with the notion that the case was at all serious, or needed an uninterrupted cure. I passed days in the woods and fields, gunning or picking berries; I spent myself in heavy work; I made little journeys; and all this was very wholesome and very well; but I did not give up my reading or any attempts to write. No doubt I was secretly proud to have been invalided in so great a cause, and to be sicklied over with the pale cast of thought, rather than by some ignoble ague or the devastating consumption of that region. If I lay awake, noting the wild pulsations of my heart, and listening to the death-watch in the wall, I was certainly very much seared, but I was not without the consolation that I was at least a sufferer for literature. At the

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same time that I was so horribly afraid of dying, I could have composed an epitaph which would have moved others to tears for my untimely fate. But there was really no impairment of my constitution, and after a while I began to be better, and little by little the health which has never since failed me under any reasonable stress of work established itself.

I was in the midst of this unequal struggle when I first became acquainted with the poet who at once possessed himself of what was best worth having in me. Probably I knew of Tennyson by extracts, and from the English reviews, but I believe it was from reading one of Curtis's "Easy Chair" papers that I was prompted to get the new poem of "Maud," which I understood from the "Easy Chair" was then moving polite youth in the East. It did not seem to me that I could very well live without that poem, and when I went to Cleveland with the hope that I might have courage to propose a translation of *Lazarillo* to a publisher it was with the fixed purpose of getting "Maud" if it was to be found in any book-store there.

I do not know why I was so long in reaching Tennyson, and I can only account for it by the fact that I was always reading rather the earlier than the later English poetry. To be sure I had passed through what I may call a paroxysm of Alexander Smith, a poet deeply unknown to the present generation, but then acclaimed immortal by all the critics, and put with Shakespeare, who must be a good deal astonished from time to time in his Elysian quiet by the companionship thrust upon him. I read this now dead-and-gone immortal with an ecstasy unspeakable; I raved of him by day, and dreamed of him by night; I got great lengths of his "Life-Drama" by heart, and I can still repeat several gorgeous passages from it; I would almost have been willing to

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take the life of the sole critic who had the sense to laugh at him, and who made his wicked fun in *Graham's Magazine*, an extinct periodical of the old extinct Philadelphian species. I cannot tell how I came out of this craze, but neither could any of the critics who led me into it, I dare say. The reading world is very susceptible of such lunacies, and all that can be said is that at a given time it was time for criticism to go mad over a poet who was neither better nor worse than many another third-rate poet apotheosized before and since. What was good in Smith was the reflected fire of the poets who had a vital heat in them; and it was by mere chance that I bathed myself in his second-hand effulgence. I already knew pretty well the origin of the Tennysonian line in English poetry; Wordsworth, and Keats, and Shelley; and I did not come to Tennyson's worship a sudden convert, but my devotion to him was none the less complete and exclusive. Like every other great poet he somehow expressed the feelings of his day, and I suppose that at the time he wrote "Maud" he said more fully what the whole English-speaking race were then dimly longing to utter than any English poet who has lived.

One need not question the greatness of Browning in owning the fact that the two poets of his day who pre-eminently voiced their generation were Tennyson and Longfellow; though Browning, like Emerson, is possibly now more modern than either. However, I had then nothing to do with Tennyson's comparative claim on my adoration; there was for the time no parallel for him in the whole range of literary divinities that I had bowed the knee to. For that while, the temple was not only emptied of all the other idols, but I had a richly flattering illusion of being his only worshipper. When I came to the sense of this error, it was with the belief

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that at least no one else had ever appreciated him so fully, stood so close to him in that holy of holies where he wrought his miracles.

I say tawdrily and ineffectively and falsely what was a very precious and sacred experience with me. This great poet opened to me a whole world of thinking and feeling, where I had my being with him in that mystic intimacy which cannot be put into words. I at once identified myself not only with the hero of the poem, but in some sort with the poet himself, when I read "Maud"; but that was only the first step towards the lasting state in which his poetry has upon the whole been more to me than that of any other poet. I have never read any other so closely and continuously, or read myself so much into and out of his verse. There have been times and moods when I have had my questions, and made my cavils, and when it seemed to me that the poet was less than I had thought him; and certainly I do not revere equally and unreservedly all that he has written; that would be impossible. But when I think over all the other poets I have read, he is supreme above them in his response to some need in me that he has satisfied so perfectly.

Of course, "Maud" seemed to me the finest poem I had read, up to that time, but I am not sure that this conclusion was wholly my own; I think it was partially formed for me by the admiration of the poem which I felt to be everywhere in the critical atmosphere, and which had already penetrated to me. I did not like all parts of it equally well, and some parts of it seemed thin and poor (though I would not suffer myself to say so then), and they still seem so. But there were whole passages and spaces of it whose divine and perfect beauty lifted me above life. I did not fully understand the poem then; I do not fully understand it now, but



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that did not and does not matter; for there is something in poetry that reaches the soul by other avenues than the intelligence. Both in this poem and others of Tennyson, and in every poet that I have loved, there are melodies and harmonies enfolding a significance that appeared long after I had first read them, and had even learned them by heart; that lay sweetly in my outer ear and were enough in their mere beauty of phrasing, till the time came for them to reveal their whole meaning. In fact they could do this only to later and greater knowledge of myself and others, as every one must recognize who recurs in after-life to a book that he read when young; then he finds it twice as full of meaning as it was at first.

I could not rest satisfied with "Maud"; I sent the same summer to Cleveland for the little volume which then held all the poet's work, and abandoned myself so wholly to it, that for a year I read no other verse that I can remember. The volume was the first of that pretty blue-and-gold series which Ticknor & Fields began to publish in 1856, and which their imprint, so rarely affixed to an unworthy book, at once carried far and wide. Their modest old brown cloth binding had long been a quiet warrant of quality in the literature it covered, and now this splendid blossom of the book-making art, as it seemed, was fitly employed to convey the sweetness and richness of the loveliest poetry that I thought the world had yet known. After an old fashion of mine, I read it continuously, with frequent recurrences from each new poem to some that had already pleased me, and with a most capricious range among the pieces. "In Memoriam" was in that book, and the "Princess"; I read the "Princess" through and through, and over and over, but I did not then read "In Memoriam" through, and I have never read it in



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course; I am not sure that I have even yet read every part of it. I did not come to the "Princess," either, until I had saturated my fancy and my memory with some of the shorter poems, with the "Dream of Fair Women," with the "Lotus-Eaters," with the "Miller's Daughter," with the "Morte d'Arthur," with "Edwin Morris, or The Lake," with "Love and Duty," and a score of other minor and briefer poems. I read the book night and day, in-doors and out, to myself and to whomever I could make listen. I have no words to tell the rapture it was to me; but I hope that in some more articulate being, if it should ever be my unmerited fortune to meet that *sommo poeta* face to face, it shall somehow be uttered from me to him, and he will understand how completely he became the life of the boy I was then. I think it might please, or at least amuse, that lofty ghost, and that he would not resent it, as he would probably have done on earth. I can well understand why the homage of his worshippers should have afflicted him here, and I could never have been one to burn incense in his earthly presence; but perhaps it might be done hereafter without offence. I eagerly caught up and treasured every personal word I could find about him, and I dwelt in that sort of charmed intimacy with him through his verse, in which I could not presume nor he repel, and which I had enjoyed in turn with Cervantes and Shakespeare, without a snub from them.

I have never ceased to adore Tennyson, though the rapture of the new convert could not last. That must pass like the flush of any other passion. I think I have now a better sense of his comparative greatness, but a better sense of his positive greatness I could not have than I had at the beginning; and I believe this is the essential knowledge of a poet. It is very well

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to say one is greater than Keats, or not so great as Wordsworth; that one is or is not of the highest order of poets like Shakespeare and Dante and Goethe; but that does not mean anything of value, and I never find my account in it. I know it is not possible for any less than the greatest writer to abide lastingly in one's life. Some dazzling comer may enter and possess it for a day, but he soon wears his welcome out, and presently finds the door, to be answered with a not-at-home if he knocks again. But it was only this morning that I read one of the new last poems of Tennyson with a return of the emotion which he first woke in me well-nigh forty years ago. There has been no year of those many when I have not read him and loved him with something of the early fire if not all the early conflagration; and each successive poem of his has been for me a fresh joy.

He went with me into the world from my village when I left it to make my first venture away from home. My father had got one of those legislative clerkships which used to fall sometimes to deserving country editors when their party was in power, and we together imagined and carried out a scheme for corresponding with some city newspapers. We were to furnish a daily letter giving an account of the legislative proceedings which I was mainly to write up from material he helped me to get together. The letters at once found favor with the editors who agreed to take them, and my father then withdrew from the work altogether, after telling them who was doing it. We were afraid they might not care for the reports of a boy of nineteen, but they did not seem to take my age into account, and I did not boast of my youth among the law-makers. I looked three or four years older than I was; but I experienced a terrible moment once when a fatherly Senator asked me my

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age. I got away somehow without saying, but it was a great relief to me when my twentieth birthday came that winter, and I could honestly proclaim that I was in my twenty-first year.

I had now the free range of the State Library, and I drew many sorts of books from it. Largely, however, they were fiction, and I read all the novels of Bulwer, for whom I had already a great liking from *The Caxtons* and *My Novel*. I was dazzled by them, and I thought him a great writer, if not so great a one as he thought himself. Little or nothing of those romances, with their swelling prefaces about the poet and his function, their glittering criminals, and showy rakes and rogues of all kinds, and their patrician perfume and social splendor, remained with me; they may have been better or worse; I will not attempt to say. If I may call my fascination with them a passion at all, I must say that it was but a fitful fever. I also read many volumes of Zschokke's admirable tales, which I found in a translation in the Library, and I think I began at the same time to find out De Quincey. These authors I recall out of the many that passed through my mind almost as tracelessly as they passed through my hands. I got at some versions of Icelandic poems, in the metre of "Hiawatha"; I had for a while a notion of studying Icelandic, and I did take out an Icelandic grammar and lexicon, and decided that I would learn the language later. By this time I must have begun German, which I afterwards carried so far, with one author at least, as to find in him a delight only second to that I had in Tennyson; but as yet Tennyson was all in all to me in poetry. I suspect that I carried his poems about with me a great part of the time; I am afraid that I always had that blue-and-gold Tennyson in my pocket; and I was ready to draw it upon anybody

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at the slightest provocation. This is the worst of the ardent lover of literature: he wishes to make every one else share his rapture, will he, nill he. Many good fellows suffered from my admiration of this author or that, and many more pretty, patient maids. I wanted to read my favorite passages, my favorite poems to them; I am afraid I often did read, when they would rather have been talking; in the case of the poems I did worse, I repeated them. This seems rather incredible now, but it is true enough, and absurd as it is, it at least attests my sincerity. It was long before I cured myself of so pestilent a habit; and I am not yet so perfectly well of it that I could be safely trusted with a fascinating book and a submissive listener.

I dare say I could not have been made to understand at this time that Tennyson was not so nearly the first interest of life with other people as he was with me; I must often have suspected it, but I was helpless against the wish to make them feel him as important to their prosperity and well-being as he was to mine. My head was full of him; his words were always behind my lips; and when I was not repeating his phrase to myself or to some one else, I was trying to frame something of my own as like him as I could. It was a time of melancholy from ill-health, and of anxiety for the future in which I must make my own place in the world. Work, and hard work, I had always been used to and never afraid of; but work is by no means the whole story. You may get on without much of it, or you may do a great deal, and not get on. I was willing to do as much of it as I could get to do, but I distrusted my health, somewhat, and I had many forebodings, which my adored poet helped me to transfigure to the substance of literature, or enabled me for the time to forget. I was already imitating him in the verse I wrote; he now

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seemed the only worthy model for one who meant to be as great a poet as I did. None of the authors whom I read at all displaced him in my devotion, and I could not have believed that any other poet would ever be so much to me. In fact, as I have expressed, none ever has been.

## XXIV

HEINE

THAT winter passed very quickly and happily for me, and at the end of the legislative session I had acquitted myself so much to the satisfaction of one of the newspapers which I wrote for that I was offered a place on it. I was asked to be city editor, as it was called in that day, and I was to have charge of the local reporting. It was a great temptation, and for a while I thought it the greatest piece of good fortune. I went down to Cincinnati to acquaint myself with the details of the work, and to fit myself for it by beginning as reporter myself. One night's round of the police stations with the other reporters satisfied me that I was not meant for that work, and I attempted it no farther. I have often been sorry since, for it would have made known to me many phases of life that I have always remained ignorant of, but I did not know then that life was supremely interesting and important. I fancied that literature, that poetry was so; and it was humiliation and anguish indescribable to think of myself torn from my high ideals by labors like those of the reporter. I would not consent even to do the office work of the department, and the proprietor and editor who was more especially my friend tried to make some other place for me. All the departments were full but the one I would have nothing to do with, and after a few weeks of sufferance and suffering I



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turned my back on a thousand dollars a year, and for the second time returned to the printing-office.

I was glad to get home, for I had been all the time tormented by my old malady of homesickness. But otherwise the situation was not cheerful for me, and I now began trying to write something for publication that I could sell. I sent off poems and they came back; I offered little translations from the Spanish that nobody wanted. At the same time I took up the study of German, which I must have already played with, at such odd times as I could find. My father knew something of it, and that friend of mine among the printers was already reading it and trying to speak it. I had their help with the first steps so far as the recitations from Ollendorff were concerned, but I was impatient to read German, or rather to read one German poet who had seized my fancy from the first line of his I had seen.

This poet was Heinrich Heine, who dominated me longer than any one author that I have known. Where or when I first acquainted myself with his most fascinating genius, I cannot be sure, but I think it was in some article of the *Westminster Review*, where several poems of his were given in English and German; and their singular beauty and grace at once possessed my soul. I was in a fever to know more of him, and it was my great good luck to fall in with a German in the village who had his books. He was a bookbinder, one of those educated artisans whom the revolutions of 1848 sent to us in great numbers. He was a Hanoverian, and his accent was then, I believe, the standard, though the Berlinese is now the accepted pronunciation. But I cared very little for accent; my wish was to get at Heine with as little delay as possible; and I began to cultivate the friendship of that bookbinder

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in every way. I dare say he was glad of mine, for he was otherwise quite alone in the village, or had no companionship outside of his own family. I clothed him in all the romantic interest I began to feel for his race and language, which now took the place of the Spaniards and Spanish in my affections. He was a very quick and gay intelligence, with more sympathy for my love of our author's humor than for my love of his sentiment, and I can remember very well the twinkle of his little sharp black eyes, with their Tartar slant, and the twitching of his keenly pointed, sensitive nose, when we came to some passage of biting satire, or some phrase in which the bitter Jew had unpacked all the insult of his soul.

We began to read Heine together when my vocabulary had to be dug almost word by word out of the dictionary, for the bookbinder's English was rather scanty at the best, and was not literary. As for the grammar, I was getting that up as fast as I could from Ollendorff, and from other sources, but I was enjoying Heine before I well knew a declension or a conjugation. As soon as my task was done at the office, I went home to the books, and worked away at them until supper. Then my bookbinder and I met in my father's editorial room, and with a couple of candles on the table between us, and our Heine and the dictionary before us, we read till we were both tired out.

The candles were tallow, and they lopped at different angles in the flat candlesticks heavily loaded with lead, which compositors once used. It seems to have been summer when our readings began, and they are associated in my memory with the smell of the neighboring gardens, which came in at the open doors and windows, and with the fluttering of moths, and the



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bumbling of the dorbugs, that stole in along with the odors. I can see the perspiration on the shining forehead of the bookbinder as he looks up from some brilliant passage, to exchange a smile of triumph with me at having made out the meaning with the meagre facilities we had for the purpose; he had beautiful red pouting lips, and a stiff little branching mustache above them, that went to the making of his smile. Sometimes, in the truce we made with the text, he told a little story of his life at home, or some anecdote relevant to our reading, or quoted a passage from some other author. It seemed to me the make of a high intellectual banquet, and I should be glad if I could enjoy anything as much now.

We walked home as far as his house, or rather his apartment over one of the village stores; and as he mounted to it by an outside staircase, we exchanged a joyous "Gute Nacht," and I kept on homeward through the dark and silent village street, which was really not that street, but some other, where Heine had been, some street out of the Reisebilder, of his knowledge, or of his dream. When I reached home it was useless to go to bed. I shut myself into my little study, and went over what we had read, till my brain was so full of it that when I crept up to my room at last, it was to lie down to slumbers which were often a mere phantasmagory of those witching Pictures of Travel.

I was awake at my father's call in the morning, and before my mother had breakfast ready I had recited my lesson in Ollendorff to him. To tell the truth, I hated those grammatical studies, and nothing but the love of literature, and the hope of getting at it, could ever have made me go through them. Naturally, I never got any scholarly use of the languages I was worrying at, and though I could once write a passable

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literary German, it has all gone from me now, except for the purposes of reading. It cost me so much trouble, however, to dig the sense out of the grammar and lexicon, as I went on with the authors I was impatient to read, that I remember the words very well in all their forms and inflections, and I have still what I think I may call a fair German vocabulary.

The German of Heine, when once you are in the joke of his capricious genius, is very simple, and in his poetry it is simple from the first, so that he was, perhaps, the best author I could have fallen in with if I wanted to go fast rather than far. I found this out later, when I attempted other German authors without the glitter of his wit or the lambent glow of his fancy to light me on my hard way. I should find it hard to say just why his peculiar genius had such an absolute fascination for me from the very first, and perhaps I had better content myself with saying simply that my literary liberation began with almost the earliest word from him; for if he chained me to himself he freed me from all other bondage. I had been at infinite pains from time to time, now upon one model and now upon another, to literarify myself, if I may make a word which does not quite say the thing for me. What I mean is that I had supposed, with the sense at times that I was all wrong, that the expression of literature must be different from the expression of life; that it must be an attitude, a pose, with something of state or at least of formality in it; that it must be this style, and not that; that it must be like that sort of acting which you know is acting when you see it and never mistake for reality. There are a great many children, apparently grown-up, and largely accepted as critical authorities, who are still of this youthful opinion of mine. But Heine at once showed me that this ideal



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of literature was false; that the life of literature was from the springs of the best common speech, and that the nearer it could be made to conform, in voice, look, and gait, to graceful, easy, picturesque and humorous or impassioned talk, the better it was.

He did not impart these truths without imparting certain tricks with them, which I was careful to imitate as soon as I began to write in his manner, that is to say instantly. His tricks he had mostly at second-hand, and mainly from Sterne, whom I did not know well enough then to know their origin. But in all essentials he was himself, and my final lesson from him, or the final effect of all my lessons from him, was to find myself, and to be for good or evil whatsoever I really was.

I kept on writing as much like Heine as I could for several years, though, and for a much longer time than I should have done if I had ever become equally impassioned of any other author. Some traces of his method lingered so long in my work that nearly ten years afterwards Mr. Lowell wrote me about something of mine that he had been reading: "You must sweat the Heine out of your bones as men do mercury," and his kindness for me would not be content with less than the entire expulsion of the poison that had in its good time saved my life. I dare say it was all well enough not to have it in my bones after it had done its office, but it did do its office.

It was in some prose sketch of mine that his keen analysis had found the Heine, but the foreign property had been so prevalent in my earlier work in verse that he kept the first contribution he accepted from me for the *Atlantic Monthly* a long time, or long enough to make sure that it was not a translation of Heine. Then he printed it, and I am bound to say that the poem

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now justifies his doubt to me, in so much that I do not see why Heine should not have had the name of writing it if he had wanted. His potent spirit became immediately so wholly my "control," as the mediums say, that my poems might as well have been communications from him so far as any authority of my own was concerned; and they were quite like other inspirations from the other world in being so inferior to the work of the spirit before it had the misfortune to be disembodied and obliged to use a medium. But I do not think that either Heine or I had much lasting harm from it, and I am sure that the good, in my case at least, was one that can only end with me. He undid my hands, which I had taken so much pains to tie behind my back, and he forever persuaded me that though it may be ingenious and surprising to dance in chains, it is neither pretty nor useful.

## XXV

### DE QUINCEY, GOETHE, LONGFELLOW

ANOTHER author who was a prime favorite with me about this time was De Quincey, whose books I took out of the State Library, one after another, until I had read them all. We who were young people of that day thought his style something wonderful, and so indeed it was, especially in those passages, abundant everywhere in his work, relating to his own life with an intimacy which was always more rather than less. His rhetoric there, and in certain of his historical studies, had a sort of luminous richness, without losing its colloquial ease. I keenly enjoyed this subtle spirit, and the play of that brilliant intelligence which lighted up so many ways of literature with its lambent glow or its tricky glimmer, and I had a deep sympathy with certain morbid moods and experiences so like my own, as I was pleased to fancy. I have not looked at his *Twelve Cæsars* for twice as many years, but I should be greatly surprised to find it other than one of the greatest historical monographs ever written. His literary criticisms seemed to me not only exquisitely humorous, but perfectly sane and just; and it delighted me to have him personally present, with the warmth of his own temperament in regions of cold abstraction; I am not sure that I should like that so much now. De Quincey was hardly less autobiographical when he wrote of Kant, or the Flight of the Crim-Tartars, than when

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he wrote of his own boyhood or the miseries of the opium habit. He had the hospitable gift of making you at home with him, and appealing to your sense of comradeship with something of the flattering confidentiality of Thackeray, but with a wholly different effect.

In fact, although De Quincey was from time to time perfunctorily Tory, and always a good and faithful British subject, he was so eliminated from his time and place by his single love for books, that one could be in his company through the whole vast range of his writings, and come away without a touch of snobbishness; and that is saying a great deal for an English writer. He was a great little creature, and through his intense personality he achieved a sort of impersonality, so that you loved the man, who was forever talking of himself, for his modesty and reticence. He left you feeling intimate with him but by no means familiar; with all his frailties, and with all those freedoms he permitted himself with the lives of his contemporaries, he is to me a figure of delicate dignity, and winning kindness. I think it a misfortune for the present generation that his books have fallen into a kind of neglect, and I believe that they will emerge from it again to the advantage of literature.

In spite of Heine and Tennyson, De Quincey had a large place in my affections, though this was perhaps because he was not a poet; for more than those two great poets there was then not much room. I read him the first winter I was at Columbus, and when I went down from the village the next winter, to take up my legislative correspondence again, I read him more than ever. But that was destined to be for me a very disheartening time. I had just passed through a rheumatic fever, which left my health more broken than before, and one morning shortly after I was settled in the

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capital, I woke to find the room going round me like a wheel. It was the beginning of a vertigo which lasted for six months, and which I began to fight with various devices and must yield to at last. I tried medicine and exercise, but it was useless, and my father came to take my letters off my hands while I gave myself some ineffectual respites. I made a little journey to my old home in southern Ohio, but there and everywhere, the sure and firm-set earth waved and billowed under my feet, and I came back to Columbus and tried to forget in my work the fact that I was no better. I did not give up trying to read, as usual, and part of my endeavor that winter was with Schiller, and Uhland, and even Goethe, whose *Wahlverwandschaften* hardly yielded up its mystery to me. To tell the truth, I do not think that I found my account in that novel. It must needs be a disappointment after *Wilhelm Meister*, which I had read in English; but I dare say my disappointment was largely my own fault; I had certainly no right to expect such constant proofs and instances of wisdom in Goethe as the unwisdom of his critics had led me to hope for. I remember little or nothing of the story, which I tried to find very memorable, as I held my sick way through it. Longfellow's "Miles Standish" came out that winter, and I suspect that I got vastly more real pleasure from that one poem of his than I found in all my German authors put together, the adored Heine always excepted; though certainly I felt the romantic beauty of Uhland, and was aware of something of Schiller's generous grandeur.

Of the American writers Longfellow has been most a passion with me, as the English, and German, and Spanish, and Russian writers have been. I am sure that this was largely by mere chance. It was because I happened, in such a frame and at such a time, to

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come upon his books that I loved them above those of other men as great. I am perfectly sensible that Lowell and Emerson outvalue many of the poets and prophets I have given my heart to; I have read them with delight and with a deep sense of their greatness, and yet they have not been my life like those other, those lesser, men. But none of the passions are reasoned, and I do not try to account for my literary preferences or to justify them.

I dragged along through several months of that winter, and did my best to carry out that notable scheme of not minding my vertigo. I tried doing half-work, and helping my father with the correspondence, but when it appeared that nothing would avail, he remained in charge of it, till the close of the session, and I went home to try what a complete and prolonged rest would do for me. I was not fit for work in the printing-office, but that was a simpler matter than the literary work that was always tempting me. I could get away from it only by taking my gun and tramping day after day through the deep, primeval woods. The fatigue was wholesome, and I was so bad a shot that no other creature suffered loss from my gain except one hapless wild pigeon. The thawing snow left the fallen beechnuts of the autumn before uncovered among the dead leaves, and the forest was full of the beautiful birds. In most parts of the middle West they are no longer seen, except in twos or threes, but once they were like the sands of the sea for multitude. It was not now the season when they hid half the heavens with their flight day after day; but they were in myriads all through the woods, where their iridescent breasts shone like a sudden untimely growth of flowers when you came upon them from the front. When they rose in fright, it was like the upward leap of fire, and with the roar of flame. I use images



which, after all, are false to the thing I wish to express; but they must serve. I tried honestly enough to kill the pigeons, but I had no luck, or too much, till I happened to bring down one of a pair that I found apart from the rest in a lofty tree-top. The poor creature I had widowed followed me to the verge of the woods, as I started home with my prey, and I do not care to know more personally the feelings of a murderer than I did then. I tried to shoot the bird, but my aim was so bad that I could not do her this mercy, and at last she flew away, and I saw her no more.

The spring was now opening, and I was able to keep more and more with Nature, who was kinder to me than I was to her other children, or wished to be, and I got the better of my malady, which gradually left me for no more reason apparently than it came upon me. But I was still far from well, and I was in despair of my future. I began to read again—I suppose I had really never altogether stopped. I borrowed from my friend the bookbinder a German novel, which had for me a message of lasting cheer. It was the *Afraja* of Theodore Mügge, a story of life in Norway during the last century, and I remember it as a very lovely story indeed, with honest studies of character among the Norwegians, and a tender pathos in the fate of the little Lap heroine Gula, who was perhaps sufficiently romanced. The hero was a young Dane, who was going up among the fiords to seek his fortune in the northern fisheries; and by a process inevitable in youth I became identified with him, so that I adventured, and enjoyed, and suffered in his person throughout. There was a supreme moment when he was sailing through the fiords, and finding himself apparently locked in by their mountain walls without sign or hope of escape, but somehow always escaping by some unimagined channel, and keep-

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ing on. The lesson for him was one of trust and courage; and I, who seemed to be then shut in upon a mountain-walled fiord without inlet or outlet, took the lesson home and promised myself not to lose heart again. It seems a little odd that this passage of a book, by no means of the greatest, should have had such an effect with me at a time when I was no longer so young as to be unduly impressed by what I read; but it is true that I have never since found myself in circumstances where there seemed to be no getting forward or going back, without a vision of that fiord scenery, and then a rise of faith, that if I kept on I should, somehow, come out of my prisoning environment.

## XXVI

GEORGE ELIOT, HAWTHORNE, GOETHE, HEINE

I GOT back health enough to be of use in the printing-office that autumn, and I was quietly at work there with no visible break in my surroundings when suddenly the whole world opened to me through what had seemed an impenetrable wall. The Republican newspaper at the capital had been bought by a new management, and the editorial force reorganized upon a footing of what we then thought metropolitan enterprise; and to my great joy and astonishment I was asked to come and take a place in it. The place offered me was not one of lordly distinction; in fact, it was partly of the character of that I had already rejected in Cincinnati, but I hoped that in the smaller city its duties would not be so odious; and by the time I came to fill it, a change had taken place in the arrangements so that I was given charge of the news department. This included the literary notices and the book reviews, and I am afraid that I at once gave my prime attention to these.

It was an evening paper, and I had nearly as much time for reading and study as I had at home. But now society began to claim a share of this leisure, which I by no means begrudged it. Society was very charming in Columbus then, with a pretty constant round of dances and suppers, and an easy cordiality, which I dare say young people still find in it everywhere. I met

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a great many cultivated people, chiefly young ladies, and there were several houses where we young fellows went and came almost as freely as if they were our own. There we had music and cards, and talk about books, and life appeared to me richly worth living; if any one had said this was not the best planet in the universe I should have called him a pessimist, or at least thought him so, for we had not the word in those days. A world in which all those pretty and gracious women dwelt, among the figures of the waltz and the lancers, with chat between about the last instalment of *The Newcomes*, was good enough world for me; I was only afraid it was too good. There were, of course, some girls who did not read, but few openly professed indifference to literature, and there was much lending of books back and forth, and much debate of them. That was the day when *Adam Bede* was a new book, and in this I had my first knowledge of that great intellect for which I had no passion, indeed, but always the deepest respect, the highest honor; and which has from time to time profoundly influenced me by its ethics.

I state these things simply and somewhat baldly; I might easily refine upon them, and study that subtle effect for good and for evil which young people are always receiving from the fiction they read; but this is not the time or place for the inquiry, and I only wish to own that so far as I understand it, the chief part of my ethical experience has been from novels. The life and character I have found portrayed there have appealed always to the consciousness of right and wrong implanted in me; and from no one has this appeal been stronger than from George Eliot. Her influence continued through many years, and I can question it now only in the undue burden she seems to throw upon the individual, and her failure to account largely

enough for motive from the social environment. There her work seems to me unphilosophical.

It shares whatever error there is in its perspective with that of Hawthorne, whose *Marble Faun* was a new book at the same time that *Adam Bede* was new, and whose books now came into my life and gave it their tinge. He was always dealing with the problem of evil, too, and I found a more potent charm in his more artistic handling of it than I found in George Eliot. Of course, I then preferred the region of pure romance where he liked to place his action; but I did not find his instances the less veritable because they shone out in

“The light that never was on sea or land.”

I read the *Marble Faun* first, and then the *Scarlet Letter*, and then the *House of Seven Gables*, and then the *Blithedale Romance*; but I always liked best the last, which is more nearly a novel, and more realistic than the others. They all moved me with a sort of effect such as I had not felt before. They were so far from time and place that, although most of them related to our country and epoch, I could not imagine anything approximate from them; and Hawthorne himself seemed a remote and impalpable agency, rather than a person whom one might actually meet, as not long afterward happened with me. I did not hold the sort of fancied converse with him that I held with other authors, and I cannot pretend that I had the affection for him that attracted me to them. But he held me by his potent spell, and for a time he dominated me as completely as any author I have read. More truly than any other American author he has been a passion with me, and lately I heard with a kind of pang a young man saying that he did not believe I should find the *Scarlet Letter* bear reading now. I did not assent to the possi-

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bility, but the notion gave me a shiver of dismay. I thought how much that book had been to me, how much all of Hawthorne's books had been, and to have parted with my faith in their perfection would have been something I would not willingly have risked doing.

Of course there is always something fatally weak in the scheme of the pure romance, which, after the color of the contemporary mood dies out of it, leaves it in danger of tumbling into the dust of allegory; and perhaps this inherent weakness was what that bold critic felt in the *Scarlet Letter*. But none of Hawthorne's fables are without a profound and distant reach into the recesses of nature and of being. He came back from his researches with no solution of the question, with no message, indeed, but the awful warning, "Be true, be true," which is the burden of the *Scarlet Letter*; yet in all his books there is the hue of thoughts that we think only in the presence of the mysteries of life and death. It is not his fault that this is not intelligence, that it knots the brow in sorer doubt rather than shapes the lips to utterance of the things that can never be said. Some of his shorter stories I have found thin and cold to my later reading, and I have never cared much for the *House of Seven Gables*, but the other day I was reading the *Blithedale Romance* again, and I found it as potent, as significant, as sadly and strangely true as when it first enthralled my soul.

In those days when I tried to kindle my heart at the cold altar of Goethe, I did read a great deal of his prose and somewhat of his poetry, but it was to be ten years yet before I should go faithfully through with his *Faust* and come to know its power. For the present, I read *Wilhelm Meister* and the *Wahlverwandtschaften*, and worshipped him much at second-hand through Heine. In the mean time I invested such Ger-



mans as I met with the halo of their national poetry, and there was one lady of whom I heard with awe that she had once known my Heine. When I came to meet her, over a glass of the mild egg-nog which she served at her house on Sunday nights, and she told me about Heine, and how he looked, and some few things he said, I suffered an indescribable disappointment; and if I could have been frank with myself I should have owned to a fear that it might have been something like that, if I had myself met the poet in the flesh, and tried to hold the intimate converse with him that I held in the spirit. But I shut my heart to all such misgivings and went on reading him much more than I read any other German author. I went on writing him too, just as I went on reading and writing Tennyson. Heine was always a personal interest with me, and every word of his made me long to have had him say it to me, and tell me why he said it. In a poet of alien race and language and religion I found a greater sympathy than I have experienced with any other. Perhaps the Jews are still the chosen people, but now they bear the message of humanity, while once they bore the message of divinity. I knew the ugliness of Heine's nature: his revengefulness, and malice, and cruelty, and treachery, and uncleanness; and yet he was supremely charming among the poets I have read. The tenderness I still feel for him is not a reasoned love, I must own; but, as I am always asking, when was love ever reasoned?

I had a room-mate that winter in Columbus who was already a contributor to the *Atlantic Monthly*, and who read Browning as devotedly as I read Heine. I will not say that he wrote him as constantly, but if that had been so, I should not have cared. What I could not endure without pangs of secret jealousy was that he should like Heine, too, and should read him,

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though it was but an arm's-length in an English version. He had found the origins of those tricks and turns of Heine's in *Tristram Shandy* and the *Sentimental Journey*; and this galled me, as if he had shown that some mistress of my soul had studied her graces from another girl, and that it was not all her own hair that she wore. I hid my rancor as well as I could, and took what revenge lay in my power by insinuating that he might have a very different view if he read Heine in the original. I also made haste to try my own fate with the *Atlantic*, and I sent off to Mr. Lowell that poem which he kept so long in order to make sure that Heine had not written it, as well as authorized it.

## XXVII

CHARLES READE

THIS was the winter when my friend Piatt and I made our first literary venture together in those *Poems of Two Friends*, which hardly passed the circle of our amity; and it was altogether a time of high literary exaltation with me. I walked the streets of the friendly little city by day and by night with my head so full of rhymes and poetic phrases that it seemed as if their buzzing might have been heard several yards away; and I do not yet see quite how I contrived to keep their music out of my newspaper paragraphs. Out of the newspaper I could not keep it, and from time to time I broke into verse in its columns, to the great amusement of the leading editor, who knew me for a young man with a very sharp tooth for such self-betrayals in others. He wanted to print a burlesque review he wrote of the *Poems of Two Friends* in our paper, but I would not suffer it. I must allow that it was very funny, and that he was always a generous friend, whose wounds would have been as faithful as any that could have been dealt me then. He did not indeed care much for any poetry but that of Shakespeare and the *In-goldsby Legends*; and when one morning a State Senator came into the office with a volume of Tennyson, and began to read,

“The poet in a golden clime was born,  
With golden stars above;  
Dowered with the hate of hate, the scorn of scorn  
The love of love,”

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he hitched his chair about, and started in on his leader for the day.

He might have been more patient if he had known that this State Senator was to be President Garfield. But who could know anything of the tragical history that was so soon to follow that winter of 1859-60? Not I; at least I listened rapt by the poet and the reader, and it seemed to me as if the making and the reading of poetry were to go on forever, and that was to be all there was of it. To be sure I had my hard little journalistic misgivings that it was not quite the thing for a State Senator to come round reading Tennyson at ten o'clock in the morning, and I dare say I felt myself superior in my point of view, though I could not resist the charm of the verse. I myself did not bring Tennyson to the office at that time. I brought Thackeray, and I remember that one day when I had read half an hour or so in the *Book of Snobs*, the leading editor said frankly, Well, now, he guessed we had had enough of that. He apologized afterwards as if he were to blame, and not I, but I dare say I was a nuisance with my different literary passions, and must have made many of my acquaintances very tired of my favorite authors. I had some consciousness of the fact, but I could not help it.

I ought not to omit from the list of these favorites an author who was then beginning to have his greatest vogue, and who somehow just missed of being a very great one. We were all reading his jaunty, nervy, knowing books, and some of us were questioning whether we ought not to set him above Thackeray and Dickens and George Eliot, *tulli quanti*, so great was the effect that Charles Reade had with our generation. He was a man who stood at the parting of the ways between realism and romanticism, and if he had been somewhat more

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of a man he might have been the master of a great school of English realism; but, as it was, he remained content to use the materials of realism and produce the effect of romanticism. He saw that life itself infinitely outvalued anything that could be feigned about it, but its richness seemed to corrupt him, and he had not the clear, ethical conscience which forced George Eliot to be realistic when probably her artistic prepossessions were romantic.

As yet, however, there was no reasoning of the matter, and Charles Reade was writing books of tremendous adventure and exaggerated character, which he prided himself on deriving from the facts of the world around him. He was intoxicated with the discovery he had made that the truth was beyond invention, but he did not know what to do with the truth in art after he had found it in life, and to this day the English mostly do not. We young people were easily taken with his glittering error, and we read him with much the same fury that he wrote. *Never Too Late to Mend; Love Me Little, Love Me Long; Christie Johnstone; Peg Woffington*; and then, later, *Hard Cash, The Cloister and the Hearth, Foul Play, Put Yourself in His Place*—how much they all meant once, or seemed to mean!

The first of them, and the other poems and fictions I was reading, meant more to me than the rumors of war that were then filling the air, and that so soon became its awful actualities. To us who have our lives so largely in books the material world is always the fable, and the ideal the fact. I walked with my feet on the ground, but my head was in the clouds, as light as any of them. I neither praise nor blame this fact; but I feel bound to own it, for that time, and for every time in my life, since the witchery of literature began with me.

## MY LITERARY PASSIONS

Those two happy winters in Columbus, when I was finding opportunity and recognition, were the heyday of life for me. There has been no time like them since, though there have been smiling and prosperous times a plenty; for then I was in the blossom of my youth, and what I had not I could hope for without unreason, for I had so much of that which I had most desired. Those times passed, and there came other times, long years of abeyance, and waiting, and defeat, which I thought would never end, but they passed, too.

I got my appointment of Consul to Venice, and I went home to wait for my passport and to spend the last days, so full of civic trouble, before I should set out for my post. If I hoped to serve my country there and sweep the Confederate cruisers from the Adriatic, I am afraid my prime intent was to add to her literature and to my own credit. I intended, while keeping a sleepless eye out for privateers, to write poems concerning American life which should eclipse anything yet done in that kind, and in the mean time I read voraciously and perpetually, to make the days go swiftly which I should have been so glad to have linger. In this month I devoured all the Waverley novels, but I must have been devouring a great many others, for Charles Reade's *Christie Johnstone* is associated with the last moment of the last days.

A few months ago I was at the old home, and I read that book again, after not looking at it for more than thirty years; and I read it with amazement at its prevailing artistic vulgarity, its prevailing æsthetic error shot here and there with gleams of light, and of the truth that Reade himself was always dimly groping for. The book is written throughout on the verge of realism, with divinations and conjectures across its border, and with lapses into the fool's paradise of romanticism, and



## CHARLES READE

an apparent content with its inanity and impossibility. But then it was brilliantly new and surprising; it seemed to be the last word that could be said for the truth in fiction; and it had a spell that held us like an anæsthetic above the ache of parting, and the anxiety for the years that must pass, with all their redoubled chances, before our home circle could be made whole again. I read on, and the rest listened, till the wheels of the old stage made themselves heard in their approach through the absolute silence of the village street. Then we shut the book and all went down to the gate together, and parted under the pale sky of the October night. There was one of the home group whom I was not to see again: the young brother who died in the blossom of his years before I returned from my far and strange sojourn. He was too young then to share our reading of the novel, but when I ran up to his room to bid him good-by I found him awake, and, with aching hearts, we bade each other good-by forever!

## XXVIII

### DANTE

I RAN through an Italian grammar on my way across the Atlantic, and from my knowledge of Latin, Spanish, and French, I soon had a reading acquaintance with the language. I had really wanted to go to Germany, that I might carry forward my studies in German literature, and I first applied for the consulate at Munich. The powers at Washington thought it quite the same thing to offer me Rome; but I found that the income of the Roman consulate would not give me a living, and I was forced to decline it. Then the President's private secretaries, Mr. John Nicolay and Mr. John Hay, who did not know me except as a young Westerner who had written poems in the *Atlantic Monthly*, asked me how I would like Venice, and promised that they would have the salary put up to a thousand a year, under the new law to embarrass privateers. It was really put up to fifteen hundred, and with this income assured me I went out to the city whose influence changed the whole course of my literary life.

No privateers ever came, though I once had notice from Turin that the *Florida* had been sighted off Ancona; and I had nearly four years of nearly uninterrupted leisure at Venice, which I meant to employ in reading all Italian literature, and writing a history of the republic. The history, of course, I expected would

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be a long affair, and I did not quite suppose that I could despatch the literature in any short time; besides, I had several considerable poems on hand that occupied me a good deal, and I worked at these as well as advanced myself in Italian, preparatory to the efforts before me.

I had already a slight general notion of Italian letters from Leigh Hunt, and from other agreeable English Italianates; and I knew that I wanted to read not only the four great poets, Dante, Petrarch, Ariosto, and Tasso, but that whole group of burlesque poets, Pulci, Berni, and the rest, who, from what I knew of them, I thought would be even more to my mind. As a matter of fact, and in the process of time, I did read somewhat of all these, but rather in the minor than the major way; and I soon went off from them to the study of the modern poets, novelists, and playwrights who interested me so much more. After my wonted fashion I read half a dozen of these authors together, so that it would be hard to say which I began with, but I had really a devotion to Dante, though not at that time, or ever for the whole of Dante. During my first year in Venice I met an ingenious priest, who had been a tutor in a patrician family, and who was willing to lead my faltering steps through the "Inferno." This part of the "Divine Comedy" I read with a beginner's carefulness, and with a rapture in its beauties, which I will whisper the reader do not appear in every line.

Again I say it is a great pity that criticism is not honest about the masterpieces of literature, and does not confess that they are not every moment masterly, that they are often dull and tough and dry, as is certainly the case with Dante's. Some day, perhaps, we shall have this way of treating literature, and then the

## MY LITERARY PASSIONS

lover of it will not feel obliged to browbeat himself into the belief that if he is not always enjoying himself it is his own fault. At any rate I will permit myself the luxury of frankly saying that while I had a deep sense of the majesty and grandeur of Dante's design, many points of its execution bored me, and that I found the intermixture of small local fact and neighborhood history in the fabric of his lofty creation no part of its noblest effect. What is marvellous in it is its expression of Dante's personality, and I can never think that his personalities enhance its greatness as a work of art. I enjoyed them, however, and I enjoyed them the more, as the innumerable perspectives of Italian history began to open all about me. Then, indeed, I understood the origins if I did not understand the aims of Dante, which there is still much dispute about among those who profess to know them clearly. What I finally perceived was that his poem came through him from the heart of Italian life, such as it was in his time, and that whatever it teaches, his poem expresses that life, in all its splendor and squalor, its beauty and deformity, its love and its hate.

Criticism may torment this sense or that sense out of it, but at the end of the ends the "Divine Comedy" will stand for the patriotism of mediæval Italy, as far as its ethics is concerned, and for a profound and lofty ideal of beauty, as far as its æsthetics is concerned. This is vague enough and slight enough, I must confess, but I must confess also that I had not even a conception of so much when I first read the "Inferno." I went at it very simply, and my enjoyment of it was that sort which finds its account in the fine passages, the brilliant episodes, the striking pictures. This was the effect with me of all the criticism which I had hitherto read, and I am not sure yet that the criticism



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which tries to be of a larger scope, and to see things "whole," is of any definite effect. As a matter of fact we see nothing whole, neither life nor art. We are so made, in soul and in sense, that we can deal only with parts, with points, with degrees; and the endeavor to compass any entirety must involve a discomfort and a danger very threatening to our intellectual integrity.

Or if this postulate is as untenable as all the others, still I am very glad that I did not then lose any fact of the majesty, and beauty, and pathos of the great certain measures for the sake of that fourth dimension of the poem which is not yet made palpable or visible. I took my sad heart's fill of the sad story of "Paolo and Francesca," which I already knew in Leigh Hunt's adorable dilution, and most of the lines read themselves into my memory, where they linger yet. I supped on the horrors of Ugolino's fate with the strong gust of youth, which finds every exercise of sympathy a pleasure. My good priest sat beside me in these rich moments, knotting in his lap the calico handkerchief of the snuff-taker, and entering with tremulous eagerness into my joy in things that he had often before enjoyed. No doubt he had an inexhaustible pleasure in them apart from mine, for I have found my pleasure in them perennial, and have not failed to taste it as often as I have read or repeated any of the great passages of the poem to myself. This pleasure came often from some vital phrase, or merely the inspired music of a phrase quite apart from its meaning. I did not get then, and I have not got since, a distinct conception of the journey through Hell, and as often as I have tried to understand the topography of the poem I have fatigued myself to no purpose, but I do not think the essential meaning was lost upon me.

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I dare say my priest had his notion of the general shape and purport, the gross material body of the thing, but he did not trouble me with it, while we sat tranced together in the presence of its soul. He seemed, at times, so lost in the beatific vision, that he forgot my stumblings in the philological darkness, till I appealed to him for help. Then he would read aloud with that magnificent rhythm the Italians have in reading their verse, and the obscured meaning would seem to shine out of the mere music of the poem, like the color the blind feel in sound.

I do not know what has become of him, but if he is like the rest of the strange group of my guides, philosophers, and friends in literature—the printer, the organ-builder, the machinist, the drug-clerk, and the bookbinder—I am afraid he is dead. In fact, I who was then I, might be said to be dead too, so little is my past self like my present self in anything but the “increasing purpose” which has kept me one in my love of literature. He was a gentle and kindly man, with a life and a longing, quite apart from his vocation, which were never lived or fulfilled. I did not see him after he ceased to read Dante with me, and in fact I was instructed by the suspicions of my Italian friends to be careful how I consorted with a priest, who might very well be an Austrian spy. I parted with him for no such picturesque reason, for I never believed him other than the truest and faithfulest of friends, but because I was then giving myself more entirely to work in which he could not help me.

Naturally enough this was a long poem in the *terza rima* of the “Divina Commedia,” and dealing with a story of our civil war in a fashion so remote that no editor would print it. This was the first fruits and the last of my reading of Dante, in verse, and it was

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not so like Dante as I would have liked to make it; but Dante is not easy to imitate; he is too unconscious, and too single, too bent upon saying the thing that is in him, with whatever beauty inheres in it, to put on the graces that others may catch.

## XXIX

GOLDONI, MANZONI, D'AZEGLIO

HOWEVER, this poem only shared the fate of nearly all the others that I wrote at this time; they came back to me with unfailing regularity from all the magazine editors of the English-speaking world; I had no success with any of them till I sent Mr. Lowell a paper on recent Italian comedy for the *North American Review*, which he and Professor Norton had then begun to edit. I was in the mean time printing the material of *Venetian Life* and the *Italian Journeys* in a Boston newspaper after its rejection by the magazines; and my literary life, almost without my willing it, had taken the course of critical observance of books and men in their actuality.

That is to say, I was studying manners, in the elder sense of the word, wherever I could get at them in the frank life of the people about me, and in such literature of Italy as was then modern. In this pursuit I made a discovery that greatly interested me, and that specialized my inquiries. I found that the Italians had no novels which treated of their contemporary life; that they had no modern fiction but the historical romance. I found that if I wished to know their life from their literature I must go to their drama, which was even then endeavoring to give their stage a faithful picture of their civilization. There was even then, in the new circumstance of a people just liberated

from every variety of intellectual repression and political oppression, a group of dramatic authors, whose plays were not only delightful to see but delightful to read, working in the good tradition of one of the greatest realists who has ever lived, and producing a drama of vital strength and charm. One of them, whom I by no means thought the best, has given us a play, known to all the world, which I am almost ready to think with Zola is the greatest play of modern times; or if it is not so, I should be puzzled to name the modern drama that surpasses "*La Morte Civile*" of Paolo Giacometti. I learned to know all the dramatists pretty well, in the whole range of their work, on the stage and in the closet, and I learned to know still better, and to love supremely, the fine, amiable genius whom, as one of them said, they did not so much imitate as learn from to imitate nature.

This was Carlo Goldoni, one of the first of the realists, but antedating conscious realism so long as to have been born at Venice early in the eighteenth century, and to have come to his hand-to-hand fight with the romanticism of his day almost before that century had reached its noon. In the early sixties of our own century I was no more conscious of his realism than he was himself a hundred years before; but I had eyes in my head, and I saw that what he had seen in Venice so long before was so true that it was the very life of Venice in my own day; and because I have loved the truth in art above all other things, I fell instantly and lastingly in love with Carlo Goldoni. I was reading his memoirs, and learning to know his sweet, honest, simple nature while I was learning to know his work, and I wish that every one who reads his plays would read his life as well; one must know him before one can fully know them. I believe, in fact, that his autobiography came

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into my hands first. But, at any rate, both are associated with the fervors and languors of that first summer in Venice, so that I cannot now take up a book of Goldoni's without a renewed sense of that sunlight and moonlight, and of the sounds and silences of a city that is at once the stillest and shrillest in the world.

Perhaps because I never found his work of great ethical or æsthetical proportions, but recognized that it pretended to be good only within its strict limitations, I recur to it now without that painful feeling of a diminished grandeur in it, which attends us so often when we go back to something that once greatly pleased us. It seemed to me at the time that I must have read all his comedies in Venice, but I kept reading new ones after I came home, and still I can take a volume of his from the shelf, and when thirty years are past, find a play or two that I missed before. Their number is very great, but perhaps those that I fancy I have not read, I have really read once or more and forgotten. That might very easily be, for there is seldom anything more poignant in any one of them than there is in the average course of things. The plays are light and amusing transcripts from life, for the most part, and where at times they deepen into powerful situations, or express strong emotions, they do so with persons so little different from the average of our acquaintance that we do not remember just who the persons are.

There is no doubt but the kindly playwright had his conscience, and meant to make people think as well as laugh. I know of none of his plays that is of wrong effect, or that violates the instincts of purity, or insults common sense with the romantic pretence that wrong will be right if you will only paint it rose-color. He is at some obvious pains to "punish vice and reward virtue," but I do not mean that easy morality when I



praise his; I mean the more difficult sort that recognizes in each man's soul the arbiter not of his fate surely, but surely of his peace. He never makes a fool of the spectator by feigning that passion is a reason or justification, or that suffering of one kind can atone for wrong of another. That was left for the romanticists of our own century to discover; even the romanticists whom Goldoni drove from the stage, were of that simpler eighteenth-century sort who had not yet liberated the individual from society, but held him accountable in the old way. As for Goldoni himself, he apparently never dreams of transgression; he is of rather an explicit conventionality in most things, and he deals with society as something finally settled. How artfully he deals with it, how decently, how wholesomely, those who know Venetian society of the eighteenth century historically will perceive when they recall the adequate impression he gives of it without offence in character or language or situation. This is the perpetual miracle of his comedy, that it says so much to experience and worldly wisdom, and so little to inexperience and worldly innocence. No doubt the Serenest Republic was very strict with the theatre, and suffered it to hold the mirror up to nature only when nature was behaving well, or at least behaving as if young people were present. Yet the Italians are rather plain-spoken, and they recognize facts which our company manners at least do not admit the existence of. I should say that Goldoni was almost English, almost American, indeed, in his observance of the proprieties, and I like this in him; though the proprieties are not virtues, they are very good things, and at least are better than the improprieties.

This, however, I must own, had not a great deal to do with my liking him so much, and I should be puzzled to account for my passion, as much in his case

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as in most others. If there was any reason for it, perhaps it was that he had the power of taking me out of my life, and putting me into the lives of others, whom I felt to be human beings as much as myself. To make one live in others, this is the highest effect of religion as well as of art, and possibly it will be the highest bliss we shall ever know. I do not pretend that my translation was through my unselfishness; it was distinctly through that selfishness which perceives that self is misery; and I may as well confess here that I do not regard the artistic ecstasy as in any sort noble. It is not noble to love the beautiful, or to live for it, or by it; and it may even not be refining. I would not have any reader of mine, looking forward to some æsthetic career, suppose that this love is any merit in itself; it may be the grossest egotism. If you cannot look beyond the end you aim at, and seek the good which is not your own, all your sacrifice is to yourself and not of yourself, and you might as well be going into business. In itself and for itself it is no more honorable to win fame than to make money, and the wish to do the one is no more elevating than the wish to do the other.

But in the days I write of I had no conception of this, and I am sure that my blindness to so plain a fact kept me even from seeking and knowing the highest beauty in the things I worshipped. I believe that if I had been sensible of it I should have read much more of such humane Italian poets and novelists as Manzoni and D'Azeglio, whom I perceived to be delightful, without dreaming of them in the length and breadth of their goodness. Now and then its extent flashed upon me, but the glimpse was lost to my retroverted vision almost as soon as won. It is only in thinking back to them that I can realize how much they might

always have meant to me. They were both living in my time in Italy, and they were two men whom I should now like very much to have seen, if I could have done so without that futility which seems to attend every effort to pay one's duty to such men.

The love of country in all the Italian poets and romancers of the long period of the national resurrection ennobled their art in a measure which criticism has not yet taken account of. I conceived of its effect then, but I conceived of it as a misfortune, a fatality; now I am by no means sure that it was so; hereafter the creation of beauty, as we call it, for beauty's sake, may be considered something monstrous. There is forever a poignant meaning in life beyond what mere living involves, and why should not there be this reference in art to the ends beyond art? The situation, the long patience, the hope against hope, dignified and beautified the nature of the Italian writers of that day, and evoked from them a quality which I was too little trained in their school to appreciate. But in a sort I did feel it, I did know it in them all, so far as I knew any of them, and in the tragedies of Manzoni, and in the romances of D'Azeglio, and yet more in the simple and modest records of D'Azeglio's life published after his death, I profited by it, and unconsciously prepared myself for that point of view whence all the arts appear one with all the uses, and there is nothing beautiful that is false.

I am very glad of that experience of Italian literature, which I look back upon as altogether wholesome and sanative, after my excesses of Heine. No doubt it was all a minor affair as compared with equal knowledge of French literature, and so far it was a loss of time. It is idle to dispute the general positions of criticism, and there is no useful gainsaying its judg-

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ment that French literature is a major literature and Italian a minor literature in this century; but whether this verdict will stand for all time, there may be a reasonable doubt. Criteria may change, and hereafter people may look at the whole affair so differently that a literature which went to the making of a people will not be accounted a minor literature, but will take its place with the great literary movements.

I do not insist upon this possibility, and I am far from defending myself for liking the comedies of Goldoni better than the comedies of Molière, upon purely æsthetic grounds, where there is no question as to the artistic quality. Perhaps it is because I came to Molière's comedies later, and with my taste formed for those of Goldoni; but again, it is here a matter of affection; I find Goldoni for me more sympathetic, and because he is more sympathetic I cannot do otherwise than find him more natural, more true. I will allow that this is vulnerable, and as I say, I do not defend it. Molière has a place in literature infinitely loftier than Goldoni's; and he has supplied types, characters, phrases, to the currency of thought, and Goldoni has supplied none. It is, therefore, without reason which I can allege that I enjoy Goldoni more. I am perfectly willing to be rated low for my preference, and yet I think that if it had been Goldoni's luck to have had the great age of a mighty monarchy for his scene, instead of the decline of an outworn republic, his place in literature might have been different.

### XXX

“PASTOR FIDO,” “AMINTA,” “ROMOLA,” “YEAST,”  
“PAUL FERROLL”

I HAVE always had a great love for the absolutely unreal, the purely fanciful in all the arts, as well as of the absolutely real; I like the one on a far lower plane than the other, but it delights me, as a pantomime at a theatre does, or a comic opera, which has its being wholly outside the realm of the probabilities. When I once transport myself to this sphere I have no longer any care for them, and if I could I would not exact of them an allegiance which has no concern with them. For this reason I have always vastly enjoyed the artificialities of pastoral poetry; and in Venice I read with a pleasure few serious poems have given me the “Pastor Fido” of Guarini. I came later but not with fainter zest to the “Aminta” of Tasso, without which, perhaps, the “Pastor Fido” would not have been, and I revelled in the pretty impossibilities of both these charming effects of the liberated imagination.

I do not the least condemn that sort of thing; one does not live by sweets, unless one is willing to spoil one's digestion; but one may now and then indulge one's self without harm, and a sugar-plum or two after dinner may even be of advantage. What I object to is the romantic thing which asks to be accepted with all its fantasticality on the ground of reality; that seems to me hopelessly bad. But I have been able to dwell in their



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charming out-land or no-land with the shepherds and shepherdesses and nymphs, satyrs, and fauns, of Tasso and Guarini, and I take the finest pleasure in their company, their Dresden china loves and sorrows, their airy raptures, their painless throes, their polite anguish, their tears not the least salt, but flowing as sweet as the purling streams of their enamelled meadows. I wish there were more of that sort of writing; I should like very much to read it.

The greater part of my reading in Venice, when I began to find that I could not help writing about the place, was in books relating to its life and history, which I made use of rather than found pleasure in. My studies in Italian literature were full of the most charming interest, and if I had to read a good many books for conscience' sake, there were a good many others I read for their own sake. They were chiefly poetry; and after the first essays in which I tasted the classic poets, they were chiefly the books of the modern poets.

For the present I went no farther in German literature, and I recurred to it in later years only for deeper and fuller knowledge of Heine; my Spanish was ignored, as all first loves are when one has reached the age of twenty-six. My English reading was almost wholly in the Tauchnitz editions, for otherwise English books were not easily come at then and there. George Eliot's *Romola* was then new, and I read it again and again with the sense of moral enlargement which the first fiction to conceive of the true nature of evil gave all of us who were young in that day. Tito Malema was not only a lesson, he was a revelation, and I trembled before him as in the presence of a warning and a message from the only veritable perdition. His life, in which so much that was good was mixed with



"PASTOR FIDO," "AMINTA," "ROMOLA"

so much that was bad, lighted up the whole domain of egotism with its glare, and made one feel how near the best and the worst were to each other, and how they sometimes touched without absolute division in texture and color. The book was undoubtedly a favorite of mine, and I did not see then the artistic falterings in it which were afterwards evident to me.

There were not *Romolas* to read all the time, though, and I had to devolve upon inferior authors for my fiction the greater part of the time. Of course, I kept up with *Our Mutual Friend*, which Dickens was then writing, and with *Philip*, which was to be the last of Thackeray. I was not yet sufficiently instructed to appreciate Trollope, and I did not read him at all.

I got hold of Kingsley, and read *Yeast*, and I think some other novels of his, with great relish, and without sensibility to his Charles Readeish lapses from his art into the material of his art. But of all the minor fiction that I read at this time none impressed me so much as three books which had then already had their vogue, and which I knew somewhat from reviews. They were *Paul Ferroll*, *Why Paul Ferroll Killed His Wife*, and *Day after Day*. The first two were, of course, related to each other, and they were all three full of unwholesome force. As to their æsthetic merit I will not say anything, for I have not looked at either of the books for thirty years. I fancy, however, that their strength was rather of the tetanic than the titanic sort. They made your sympathies go with the hero, who deliberately puts his wife to death for the lie she told to break off his marriage with the woman he had loved, and who then marries this tender and gentle girl, and lives in great happiness with her till her death. Murder in the first degree is flattered by his fate up to the point of letting him die peacefully in Boston

## MY LITERARY PASSIONS

after these dealings of his in England; and altogether his story could not be commended to people with a morbid taste for bloodshed. Naturally enough the books were written by a perfectly good woman, the wife of an English clergyman, whose friends were greatly scandalized by them. As a sort of atonement she wrote *Day after Day*, the story of a dismal and joyless orphan, who dies to the sound of angelic music, faint and far-heard, filling the whole chamber. A carefuller study of the phenomenon reveals the fact that the seraphic strains are produced by the steam escaping from the hot-water bottles at the feet of the invalid.

As usual, I am not able fully to account for my liking of these books, and I am so far from wishing to justify it that I think I ought rather to excuse it. But since I was really greatly fascinated with them, and read them with an ever-growing fascination, the only honest thing to do is to own my subjection to them. It would be an interesting and important question for criticism to study, that question why certain books at a certain time greatly dominate our fancy, and others manifestly better have no influence with us. A curious proof of the subtlety of these Paul Ferroll books in the appeal they made to the imagination is the fact that I came to them fresh from *Romolo*, and full of horror for myself in Tito; yet I sympathized throughout with Paul Ferroll, and was glad when he got away.

## XXXI

ERCKMANN-CHATRIAN, BJÖRSTJERNE BJÖRNSON

ON my return to America, my literary life immediately took such form that most of my reading was done for review. I wrote at first a good many of the lighter criticisms in *The Nation*, at New York, and after I went to Boston to become the assistant editor of the *Atlantic Monthly* I wrote the literary notices in that periodical for four or five years.

It was only when I came into full charge of the magazine that I began to share these labors with others, and I continued them in some measure as long as I had any relation to it. My reading for reading's sake, as I had hitherto done it, was at an end, and I read primarily for the sake of writing about the book in hand, and secondarily for the pleasure it might give me. This was always considerable, and sometimes so great that I forgot the critic in it, and read on and on for pleasure. I was master to review this book or that as I chose, and generally I reviewed only books I liked to read, though sometimes I felt that I ought to do a book, and did it from a sense of duty; these perfunctory criticisms I do not think were very useful, but I tried to make them honest.

In a long sickness, which I had shortly after I went to live in Cambridge, a friend brought me several of the stories of Erckmann-Chatrian, whom people were then reading much more than they are now, I believe;

## MY LITERARY PASSIONS

and I had a great joy in them, which I have renewed since as often as I have read one of their books. They have much the same quality of simple and sincerely moralized realism that I found afterwards in the work of the early Swiss realist, Jeremias Gotthelf, and very likely it was this that captivated my judgment. As for my affections, battered and exhausted as they ought to have been in many literary passions, they never went out with fresher enjoyment than they did to the charming story of *L'Ami Fritz*, which, when I merely name it, breathes the spring sun and air about me, and fills my senses with the beauty and sweetness of cherry blossoms. It is one of the loveliest and kindest books that ever was written, and my heart belongs to it still; to be sure it belongs to several hundreds of other books in equal entirety.

It belongs to all the books of the great Norwegian Bjørstjerne Björnson, whose *Arne*, and whose *Happy Boy*, and whose *Fisher Maiden* I read in this same fortunate sickness. I have since read every other book of his that I could lay hands on: *Sinnöve Solbakken*, and *Magnhild*, and *Captain Manzana*, and *Dust*, and *In God's Ways*, and *Sigurd*, and plays like "The Glove" and "The Bankrupt." He has never, as some authors have, dwindled in my sense; when I open his page, there I find him as large, and free, and bold as ever. He is a great talent, a clear conscience, a beautiful art. He has my love not only because he is a poet of the most exquisite verity, but because he is a lover of men, with a faith in them such as can move mountains of ignorance, and dulness, and greed. He is next to Tolstoy in his willingness to give himself for his kind; if he would rather give himself in fighting than in suffering wrong, I do not know that his self-sacrifice is less in degree.

I confess, however, that I do not think of him as a patriot and a socialist when I read him; he is then purely a poet, whose gift holds me rapt above the world where I have left my troublesome and wearisome self for the time. I do not know of any novels that a young endeavorer in fiction could more profitably read than his for their large and simple method, their trust of the reader's intelligence, their sympathy with life. With him the problems are all soluble by the enlightened and regenerate will; there is no baffling Fate, but a helping God. In Björnson there is nothing of Ibsen's scornful despair, nothing of his anarchistic contempt, but his art is full of the warmth and color of a poetic soul, with no touch of the icy cynicism which freezes you in the other. I have felt the cold fascination of Ibsen, too, and I should be far from denying his mighty mastery, but he has never possessed me with the delight that Björnson has.

In those days I read not only all the new books, but I made many forays into the past, and came back now and then with rich spoil, though I confess that for the most part I had my trouble for my pains; and I wish now that I had given the time I spent on the English classics to contemporary literature, which I have not the least hesitation in saying I like vastly better. In fact, I believe that the preference for the literature of the past, except in the case of the greatest masters, is mainly the affectation of people who cannot otherwise distinguish themselves from the herd, and who wish very much to do so.

There is much to be learned from the minor novelists and poets of the past about people's ways of thinking and feeling, but not much that the masters do not give you in better quality and fuller measure; and I should say, Read the old masters and let their schools

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go, rather than neglect any possible master of your own time. Above all, I would not have any one read an old author merely that he might not be ignorant of him; that is most beggarly, and no good can come of it. When literature becomes a duty it ceases to be a passion, and all the schoolmastering in the world, solemnly addressed to the conscience, cannot make the fact otherwise. It is well to read for the sake of knowing a certain ground if you are to make use of your knowledge in a certain way, but it would be a mistake to suppose that this is a love of literature.



## XXXII

TOURGUENIEF, AUERBACH

IN those years at Cambridge my most notable literary experience without doubt was the knowledge of Tourguenief's novels, which began to be recognized in all their greatness about the middle seventies. I think they made their way with such of our public as were able to appreciate them before they were accepted in England; but that does not matter. It is enough for the present purpose that *Smoke*, and *Lisa*, and *On the Eve*, and *Dimitri Roudine*, and *Spring Floods*, passed one after another through my hands, and that I formed for their author one of the profoundest literary passions of my life.

I now think that there is a finer and truer method than his, but in its way, Tourguenief's method is as far as art can go. That is to say, his fiction is to the last degree dramatic. The persons are sparsely described, and briefly accounted for, and then they are left to transact their affair, whatever it is, with the least possible comment or explanation from the author. The effect flows naturally from their characters, and when they have done or said a thing you conjecture why as unerringly as you would if they were people whom you knew outside of a book. I had already conceived of the possibility of this from Björnson, who practises the same method, but I was still too sunken in the gross darkness of English fiction to rise to a full

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consciousness of its excellence. When I remembered the deliberate and impertinent moralizing of Thackeray, the clumsy exegesis of George Eliot, the knowing nods and winks of Charles Reade, the stage-carpentering and lime-lighting of Dickens, even the fine and important analysis of Hawthorne, it was with a joyful astonishment that I realized the great art of Tourguenief.

Here was a master who was apparently not trying to work out a plot, who was not even trying to work out a character, but was standing aside from the whole affair, and letting the characters work the plot out. The method was revealed perfectly in *Smoke*, but each successive book of his that I read was a fresh proof of its truth, a revelation of its transcendent superiority. I think now that I exaggerated its value somewhat; but this was inevitable in the first surprise. The sane æsthetics of the first Russian author I read, however, have seemed more and more an essential part of the sane ethics of all the Russians I have read. It was not only that Tourguenief had painted life truly, but that he had painted it conscientiously.

Tourguenief was of that great race which has more than any other fully and freely uttered human nature, without either false pride or false shame in its nakedness. His themes were oftenest those of the French novelist, but how far he was from handling them in the French manner and with the French spirit! In his hands sin suffered no dramatic punishment; it did not always show itself as unhappiness, in the personal sense, but it was always unrest, and without the hope of peace. If the end did not appear, the fact that it must be miserable always appeared. Life showed itself to me in different colors after I had once read Tourguenief; it became more serious, more awful, and with mystical responsibilities I had not known before. My gay Amer-

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ican horizons were bathed in the vast melancholy of the Slav, patient, agnostic, trustful. At the same time nature revealed herself to me through him with an intimacy she had not hitherto shown me. There are passages in this wonderful writer alive with a truth that seems drawn from the reader's own knowledge: who else but Tourguenief and one's own most secret self ever felt all the rich, sad meaning of the night air drawing in at the open window, of the fires burning in the darkness on the distant fields? I try in vain to give some notion of the subtle sympathy with nature which scarcely put itself into words with him. As for the people of his fiction, though they were of orders and civilizations so remote from my experience, they were of the eternal human types whose origin and potentialities every one may find in his own heart, and I felt their verity in every touch.

I cannot describe the satisfaction his work gave me; I can only impart some sense of it, perhaps, by saying that it was like a happiness I had been waiting for all my life, and now that it had come, I was richly content forever. I do not mean to say that the art of Tourguenief surpasses the art of Björnson; I think Björnson is quite as fine and true. But the Norwegian deals with simple and primitive circumstances for the most part, and always with a small world; and the Russian has to do with human nature inside of its conventional shells, and his scene is often as large as Europe. Even when it is as remote as Norway, it is still related to the great capitals by the history if not the actuality of the characters. Most of Tourguenief's books I have read many times over, all of them I have read more than twice. For a number of years I read them again and again without much caring for other fiction. It was only the other day that I read *Smoke*

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through once more, with no diminished sense of its truth, but with somewhat less than my first satisfaction in its art. Perhaps this was because I had reached the point through my acquaintance with Tolstoy where I was impatient even of the artifice that hid itself. In *Smoke* I was now aware of an artifice that kept out of sight, but was still always present somewhere, invisibly operating the story.

I must not fail to own the great pleasure that I have had in some of the stories of Auerbach. It is true that I have never cared greatly for *On the Heights*, which in its dealing with royalties seems too far aloof from the ordinary human life, and which on the moral side finally fades out into a German mistiness. But I speak of it with the imperfect knowledge of one who was never able to read it quite through, and I have really no right to speak of it. The book of his that pleased me most was *Edelweiss*, which, though the story was somewhat too catastrophical, seemed to me admirably good and true. I still think it very delicately done, and with a deep insight; but there is something in all Auerbach's work which in the retrospect affects me as if it dealt with pigmies.

### XXXIII

#### CERTAIN PREFERENCES AND EXPERIENCES

I HAVE always loved history, whether in the annals of peoples or in the lives of persons, and I have at all times read it. I am not sure but I rather prefer it to fiction, though I am aware that in looking back over this record of my literary passions I must seem to have cared for very little besides fiction. I read at the time I have just been speaking of, nearly all the new poetry as it came out, and I constantly recurred to it in its mossier sources, where it sprang from the green English ground, or trickled from the antique urns of Italy.

I do not think that I have ever cared much for metaphysics, or to read much in that way, but from time to time I have done something of it.

Travels, of course, I have read as part of the great human story, and autobiography has at times appeared to me the most delightful reading in the world; I have a taste in it that rejects nothing, though I have never enjoyed any autobiographies so much as those of such Italians as have reasoned of themselves.

I suppose I have not been a great reader of the drama, and I do not know that I have ever greatly relished any plays but those of Shakespeare and Goldoni, and two or three of Beaumont and Fletcher, and one or so of Marlow's, and all of Ibsen's and Maeterlinck's. The taste for the old English dramatists I believe I have never formed.

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Criticism, ever since I filled myself so full of it in my boyhood, I have not cared for, and often I have found it repulsive.

I have a fondness for books of popular science, perhaps because they too are part of the human story.

I have read somewhat of the theology of the Swedenborgian faith I was brought up in, but I have not read other theological works; and I do not apologize for not liking any. The Bible itself was not much known to me at an age when most children have been obliged to read it several times over; the gospels were indeed familiar, and they have always been to me the supreme human story; but the rest of the New Testament I had not read when a man grown, and only passages of the Old Testament, like the story of the Creation, and the story of Joseph, and the poems of Job and Ecclesiastes, with occasional Psalms. I therefore came to the Scriptures with a sense at once fresh and mature, and I can never be too glad that I learned to see them under the vaster horizon and in the truer perspectives of experience.

Again as lights on the human story I have liked to read such books of medicine as have fallen in my way, and I seldom take up a medical periodical without reading of all the cases it describes, and in fact every article in it.

But I did not mean to make even this slight departure from the main business of these papers, which is to confide my literary passions to the reader; he probably has had a great many of his own. I think I may class the "Ring and the Book" among them, though I have never been otherwise a devotee of Browning. But I was still newly home from Italy, or away from home, when that poem appeared, and whether or not it was because it took me so with the old enchantment of that



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land, I gave my heart promptly to it. Of course, there are terrible *longueurs* in it, and you do get tired of the same story told over and over from the different points of view, and yet it is such a great story, and unfolded with such a magnificent breadth and noble fulness, that one who blames it lightly blames himself heavily. There are certain books of it—"Caponsacchi's story," "Pompilia's story," and "Count Guido's story"—that I think ought to rank with the greatest poetry ever written, and that have a direct, dramatic expression of the fact and character, which is without rival. There is a noble and lofty pathos in the close of Caponsacchi's statement, an artless and manly break from his self-control throughout, that seems to me the last possible effect in its kind; and Pompilia's story holds all of womanhood in it, the purity, the passion, the tenderness, the helplessness. But if I begin to praise this or any of the things I have liked, I do not know when I should stop. Yes, as I think it over, the "Ring and the Book" appears to me one of the great few poems whose splendor can never suffer lasting eclipse, however it may have presently fallen into abeyance. If it had impossibly come down to us from some elder time, or had not been so perfectly modern in its recognition of feeling and motives ignored by the less conscious poetry of the past, it might be ranked with the great epics.

Of other modern poets I have read some things of William Morris, like the "Life and Death of Jason," the "Story of Gudrun," and the "Trial of Guinevere," with a pleasure little less than passionate, and I have equally liked certain pieces of Dante Rossetti. I have had a high joy in some of the great minor poems of Emerson, where the goddess moves over Concord meadows with a gait that is Greek, and her sandalled

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tread expresses a high scorn of the india-rubber boots that the American muse so often gets about in.

The "Commemoration Ode" of Lowell has also been a source from which I drank something of the divine ecstasy of the poet's own exalted mood, and I would set this level with the *Biglow Papers*, high above all his other work, and chief of the things this age of our country shall be remembered by. Holmes I always loved, and not for his wit alone, which is so obvious to liking, but for those rarer and richer strains of his in which he shows himself the lover of nature and the brother of men. The deep spiritual insight, the celestial music, and the brooding tenderness of Whittier have always taken me more than his fierier appeals and his civic virtues, though I do not underrate the value of these in his verse.

My acquaintance with these modern poets, and many I do not name because they are so many, has been continuous with their work, and my pleasure in it not inconstant if not equal. I have spoken before of Longfellow as one of my first passions, and I have never ceased to delight in him; but some of the very newest and youngest of our poets have given me thrills of happiness, for which life has become lastingly sweeter.

Long after I had thought never to read it—in fact when I was *nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita*—I read Milton's "Paradise Lost," and found in it a majestic beauty that justified to me the fame it wears, and eclipsed the worth of those lesser poems which I had ignorantly accounted his worthiest. In fact, it was one of the literary passions of the time I speak of, and it shared my devotion for the novels of Tourguenief and (shall I own it?) the romances of Cherbuliez. After all, it is best to be honest, and if it is not best, it is at

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least easiest; it involves the fewest embarrassing consequences; and if I confess the spell that the *Revenge of Joseph Noirel* cast upon me for a time, perhaps I shall be able to whisper the reader behind my hand that I have never yet read the "Æneid" of Virgil; the "Georgics," yes; but the "Æneid," no. Some time, however, I expect to read it and to like it immensely. That is often the case with things that I have held aloof from indefinitely.

One fact of my experience which the reader may find interesting is that when I am writing steadily I have little relish for reading. I fancy that reading is not merely a pastime when it is apparently the merest pastime, but that a certain measure of mind-stuff is used up in it, and that if you are using up all the mind stuff you have, much or little, in some other way, you do not read because you have not the mind-stuff for it. At any rate it is in this sort only that I can account for my failure to read a great deal during four years of the amplest quiet that I spent in the country at Belmont, whither we removed from Cambridge. I had promised myself that in this quiet, now that I had given up reviewing, and wrote little or nothing in the magazine but my stories, I should again read purely for the pleasure of it, as I had in the early days before the critical purpose had qualified it with a bitter alloy. But I found that not being forced to read a number of books each month, so that I might write about them, I did not read at all, comparatively speaking. To be sure I dawdled over a great many books that I had read before, and a number of memoirs and biographies, but I had no intense pleasure from reading in that time, and have no passions to record of it. It may have been a period when no new thing happened in literature deeply to stir one's interest; I only state the fact con-

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cerning myself, and suggest the most plausible theory I can think of.

I wish also to note another incident, which may or may not have its psychological value. An important event of these years was a long sickness which kept me helpless some seven or eight weeks, when I was forced to read in order to pass the intolerable time. But in this misery I found that I could not read anything of a dramatic cast, whether in the form of plays or of novels. The mere sight of the printed page, broken up in dialogue, was anguish. Yet it was not the excitement of the fiction that I dreaded, for I consumed great numbers of narratives of travel, and was not in the least troubled by hairbreadth escapes, or shipwrecks, or perils from wild beasts or deadly serpents; it was the dramatic effect contrived by the playwright or novelist, and worked up to in the speech of his characters that I could not bear. I found a like impossible stress from the Sunday newspaper which a mistaken friend sent in to me, and which with its scare-headings, and artfully-wrought sensations, had the effect of fiction, as in fact it largely was.

At the end of four years we went abroad again, and travel took away the appetite for reading as completely as writing did. I recall nothing read in that year in Europe which moved me, and I think I read very little, except the local histories of the Tuscan cities which I afterwards wrote of.

## XXXIV

VALDÉS, GALDÓS, VERGA, ZOLA, TROLLOPE, HARDY

IN fact, it was not till I returned, and took up my life again in Boston, in the old atmosphere of work, that I turned once more to books. Even then I had to wait for the time when I undertook a critical department in one of the magazines, before I felt the rise of the old enthusiasm for an author. That is to say, I had to begin reading for business again before I began reading for pleasure. One of the first great pleasures which I had upon these terms was in the book of a contemporary Spanish author. This was the *Marta y María* of Armando Palacio Valdés, a novelist who delights me beyond words by his friendly and abundant humor, his feeling for character, and his subtle insight. I like every one of his books that I have read, and I believe that I have read nearly every one that he has written. As I mention *Riverito*, *Maximina*, *Un Idilio de un Infierno*, *La Hermana de San Sulpizio*, *El Cuarto Poder*, *Espuma*, the mere names conjure up the scenes and events that have moved me to tears and laughter, and filled me with a vivid sense of the life portrayed in them. I think the *Marta y María* one of the most truthful and profound fictions I have read, and *Maximina* one of the most pathetic, and *La Hermana de San Sulpizio* one of the most amusing. Fortunately, these books of Valdés's have nearly all been translated, and



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the reader may test the matter in English, though it necessarily halts somewhat behind the Spanish.

I do not know whether the Spaniards themselves rank Valdés with Galdós or not, and I have no wish to decide upon their relative merits. They are both present passions of mine, and I may say of the *Doña Perfecta* of Galdós that no book, if I except those of the greatest Russians, has given me a keener and deeper impression; it is infinitely pathetic, and is full of humor, which, if more caustic than that of Valdés, is not less delicious. But I like all the books of Galdós that I have read, and though he seems to have worked more tardily out of his romanticism than Valdés, since he has worked finally into such realism as that of Leon Roch, his greatness leaves nothing to be desired.

I have read one of the books of Emilia Pardo-Bazan, called *Morriña*, which must rank her with the great realists of her country and age; she, too, has that humor of her race, which brings us nearer the Spanish than any other non-Anglo-Saxon people.

A contemporary Italian, whom I like hardly less than these noble Spaniards, is Giovanni Verga, who wrote *I Malavoglia*, or, as we call it in English, *The House by the Medlar Tree*: a story of infinite beauty, tenderness and truth. As I have said before, I think with Zola that Giacometti, the Italian author of "La Morte Civile," has written almost the greatest play, all round, of modern times.

But what shall I say of Zola himself, and my admiration of his epic greatness? About his material there is no disputing among people of our Puritanic tradition. It is simply abhorrent, but when you have once granted him his material for his own use, it is idle and foolish to deny his power. Every literary theory of mine was contrary to him when I took up *L'Assommoir*,



though unconsciously I had always been as much of a realist as I could, but the book possessed me with the same fascination that I felt the other day in reading his *L'Argent*. The critics know now that Zola is not the realist he used to fancy himself, and he is full of the best qualities of the romanticism he has hated so much; but for what he is, there is but one novelist of our time, or of any, that outmasters him, and that is Tolstoy. For my own part, I think that the books of Zola are not immoral, but they are indecent through the facts that they nakedly represent; they are infinitely more moral than the books of any other French novelist. This may not be saying a great deal, but it is saying the truth, and I do not mind owning that he has been one of my great literary passions, almost as great as Flaubert, and greater than Daudet or Maupassant, though I have profoundly appreciated the exquisite artistry of both these. No French writer, however, has moved me so much as the Spanish, for the French are wanting in the humor which endears these, and is the quintessence of their charm.

You cannot be at perfect ease with a friend who does not joke, and I suppose this is what deprived me of a final satisfaction in the company of Anthony Trollope, who jokes heavily or not at all, and whom I should otherwise make bold to declare the greatest of English novelists; as it is, I must put before him Jane Austen, whose books, late in life, have been a youthful rapture with me. Even without much humor Trollope's books have been a vast pleasure to me through their simple truthfulness. Perhaps if they were more humorous they would not be so true to the British life and character present in them in the whole length and breadth of its expansive commonplaceness. It is their serious fidelity which gives them a value unique in

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literature, and which if it were carefully analyzed would afford a principle of the same quality in an author who was undoubtedly one of the finest of artists as well as the most Philistine of men.

I came rather late, but I came with all the ardor of what seems my perennial literary youth, to the love of Thomas Hardy, whom I first knew in his story *A Pair of Blue Eyes*. As usual, after I had read this book and felt the new charm in it, I wished to read the books of no other author, and to read his books over and over. I love even the faults of Hardy; I will let him play me any trick he chooses (and he is not above playing tricks, when he seems to get tired of his story or perplexed with it), if only he will go on making his peasants talk, and his rather uncertain ladies get in and out of love, and serve themselves of every chance that fortune offers them of having their own way. We shrink from the unmorality of the Latin races, but Hardy has divined in the heart of our own race a lingering heathenism, which, if not Greek, has certainly been no more baptized than the neo-hellenism of the Parisians. His heroines especially exemplify it, and I should be safe in saying that his *Ethelbertas*, his *Eustacias*, his *Elfridas*, his *Bathshebas*, his *Fancies*, are wholly pagan. I should not dare to ask how much of their charm came from that fact; and the author does not fail to show you how much harm, so that it is not on my conscience. His people live very close to the heart of nature, and no one, unless it is Tourguenief, gives you a richer and sweeter sense of her unity with human nature. Hardy is a great poet as well as a great humorist, and if he were not a great artist also his humor would be enough to endear him to me.

## XXXV

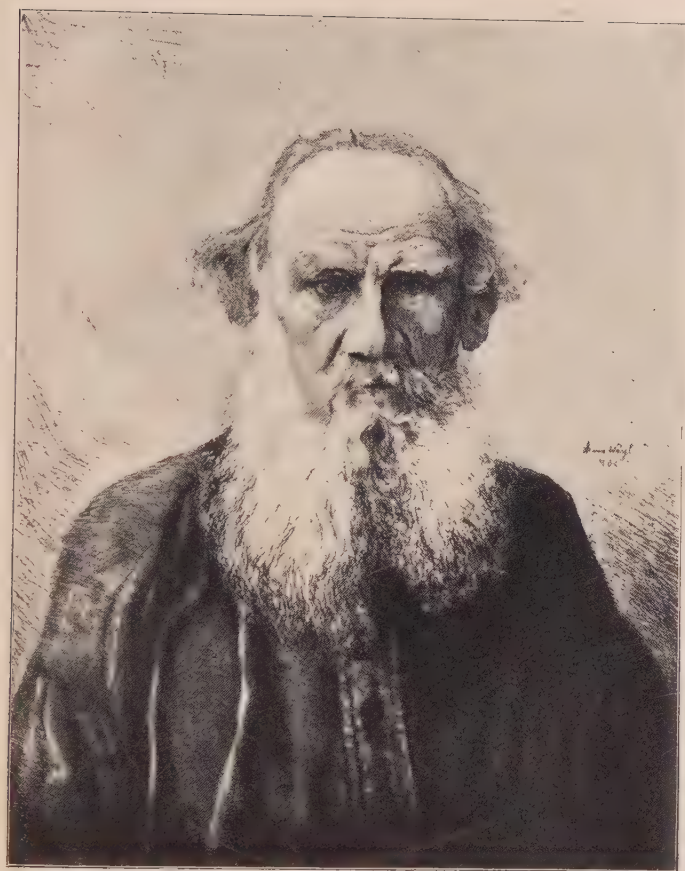
### TOLSTOY

I COME now, though not quite in the order of time, to the noblest of all these enthusiasms—namely, my devotion for the writings of Lyof Tolstoy. I should wish to speak of him with his own incomparable truth, yet I do not know how to give a notion of his influence without the effect of exaggeration. As much as one merely human being can help another I believe that he has helped me; he has not influenced me in æsthetics only, but in ethics, too, so that I can never again see life in the way I saw it before I knew him. Tolstoy awakens in his reader the will to be a man; not effectively, not spectacularly, but simply, really. He leads you back to the only true ideal, away from that false standard of the gentleman, to the Man who sought not to be distinguished from other men, but identified with them, to that Presence in which the finest gentleman shows his alloy of vanity, and the greatest genius shrinks to the measure of his miserable egotism. I learned from Tolstoy to try character and motive by no other test, and though I am perpetually false to that sublime ideal myself, still the ideal remains with me, to make me ashamed that I am not true to it. Tolstoy gave me heart to hope that the world may yet be made over in the image of Him who died for it, when all Cæsars things shall be finally rendered unto Cæsar, and men shall come into their

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own, into the right to labor and the right to enjoy the fruits of their labor, each one master of himself and servant to every other. He taught me to see life not as a chase of a forever impossible personal happiness, but as a field for endeavor towards the happiness of the whole human family; and I can never lose this vision, however I close my eyes, and strive to see my own interest as the highest good. He gave me new criterions, new principles, which, after all, were those that are taught us in our earliest childhood, before we have come to the evil wisdom of the world. As I read his different ethical books, *What to Do*, *My Confession*, and *My Religion*, I recognized their truth with a rapture such as I have known in no other reading, and I rendered them my allegiance, heart and soul, with whatever sickness of the one and despair of the other. They have it yet, and I believe they will have it while I live. It is with inexpressible astonishment that I hear them attainted of pessimism, as if the teaching of a man whose ideal was simple goodness must mean the prevalence of evil. The way he showed me seemed indeed impossible to my will, but to my conscience it was and is the only possible way. If there is any point on which he has not convinced my reason it is that of our ability to walk this narrow way alone. Even there he is logical, but as Zola subtly distinguishes in speaking of Tolstoy's essay on "Money," he is not reasonable. Solitude enfeebles and palsies, and it is as comrades and brothers that men must save the world from itself, rather than themselves from the world. It was so the earliest Christians, who had all things common, understood the life of Christ, and I believe that the latest will understand it so.

I have spoken first of the ethical works of Tolstoy, because they are of the first importance to me, but I



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## TOLSTOY

think that his æsthetical works are as perfect. To my thinking they transcend in truth, which is the highest beauty, all other works of fiction that have been written, and I believe that they do this because they obey the law of the author's own life. His conscience is one ethically and one æsthetically; with his will to be true to himself he cannot be false to his knowledge of others. I thought the last word in literary art had been said to me by the novels of Tourguenief, but it seemed like the first, merely, when I began to acquaint myself with the simpler method of Tolstoy. I came to it by accident, and without any manner of preoccupation in *The Cossacks*, one of his early books, which had been on my shelves unread for five or six years. I did not know even Tolstoy's name when I opened it, and it was with a kind of amaze that I read it, and felt word by word, and line by line, the truth of a new art in it.

I do not know how it is that the great Russians have the secret of simplicity. Some say it is because they have not a long literary past and are not conventionalized by the usage of many generations of other writers, but this will hardly account for the brotherly directness of their dealing with human nature; the absence of experience elsewhere characterizes the artist with crudeness, and simplicity is the last effect of knowledge. Tolstoy is, of course, the first of them in this supreme grace. He has not only Tourguenief's transparency of style, unclouded by any mist of the personality which we mistakenly value in style, and which ought no more to be there than the artist's personality should be in a portrait; but he has a method which not only seems without artifice, but is so. I can get at the manner of most writers, and tell what it is, but I should be baffled to tell what Tolstoy's manner is; perhaps he has no manner. This appears

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to me true of his novels, which, with their vast variety of character and incident, are alike in their single endeavor to get the persons living before you, both in their action and in the peculiarly dramatic interpretation of their emotion and cogitation. There are plenty of novelists to tell you that their characters felt and thought so and so, but you have to take it on trust; Tolstoy alone makes you know how and why it was so with them and not otherwise. If there is anything in him which can be copied or burlesqued it is this ability of his to show men inwardly as well as outwardly; it is the only trait of his which I can put my hand on.

After *The Cossacks* I read *Anna Karenina* with a deepening sense of the author's unrivalled greatness. I thought that I saw through his eyes a human affair of that most sorrowful sort as it must appear to the Infinite Compassion; the book is a sort of revelation of human nature in circumstances that have been so perpetually lied about that we have almost lost the faculty of perceiving the truth concerning an illicit love. When you have once read *Anna Karenina* you know how fatally miserable and essentially unhappy such a love must be. But the character of Karenin himself is quite as important as the intrigue of Anna and Vronsky. It is wonderful how such a man, cold, Philistine and even mean in certain ways, towers into a sublimity unknown (to me, at least), in fiction when he forgives, and yet knows that he cannot forgive with dignity. There is something crucial, and something triumphant, not beyond the power, but hitherto beyond the imagination of men in this effect, which is not solicited, not forced, not in the least romantic, but comes naturally, almost inevitably, from the make of man.

The vast prospects, the far-reaching perspectives of

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*War and Peace* made it as great a surprise for me in the historical novel as *Anna Karenina* had been in the study of contemporary life; and its people and interests did not seem more remote, since they are of a civilization always as strange and of a humanity always as known.

I read some shorter stories of Tolstoy's before I came to this greatest work of his: I read *Scenes of the Siege of Sebastopol*, which is so much of the same quality as *War and Peace*; and I read *Policoushka* and most of his short stories with a sense of my unity with their people such as I had never felt with the people of other fiction.

His didactic stories, like all stories of the sort, dwindle into allegories; perhaps they do their work the better for this, with the simple intelligences they address; but I think that where Tolstoy becomes impatient of his office of artist, and prefers to be directly a teacher, he robs himself of more than half his strength with those he can move only through the realization of themselves in others. The simple pathos, and the apparent indirectness of such a tale as that of *Policoushka*, the peasant conscript, is of vastly more value to the world at large than all his parables; and *The Death of Ivan Ilyitch*, the Philistine worldling, will turn the hearts of many more from the love of the world than such pale fables of the early Christian life as "Work while ye have the Light." A man's gifts are not given him for nothing, and the man who has the great gift of dramatic fiction has no right to cast it away or to let it rust out in disuse.

Terrible as the *Kreutzer Sonata* was, it had a moral effect dramatically which it lost altogether when the author descended to exegesis, and applied to marriage the lesson of one evil marriage. In fine, Tolstoy is certainly not to be held up as infallible. He is very,

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distinctly fallible, but I think his life is not less instructive because in certain things it seems a failure. There was but one life ever lived upon the earth which was without failure, and that was Christ's, whose erring and stumbling follower Tolstoy is. There is no other example, no other ideal, and the chief use of Tolstoy is to enforce this fact in our age, after nineteen centuries of hopeless endeavor to substitute ceremony for character, and the creed for the life. I recognize the truth of this without pretending to have been changed in anything but my point of view of it. What I feel sure is that I can never look at life in the mean and sordid way that I did before I read Tolstoy.

Artistically, he has shown me a greatness that he can never teach me. I am long past the age when I could wish to form myself upon another writer, and I do not think I could now insensibly take on the likeness of another; but his work has been a revelation and a delight to me, such as I am sure I can never know again. I do not believe that in the whole course of my reading, and not even in the early moment of my literary enthusiasms, I have known such utter satisfaction in any writer, and this supreme joy has come to me at a time of life when new friendships, not to say new passions, are rare and reluctant. It is as if the best wine at this high feast where I have sat so long had been kept for the last, and I need not deny a miracle in it in order to attest my skill in judging vintages. In fact, I prefer to believe that my life has been full of miracles, and that the good has always come to me at the right time, so that I could profit most by it. I believe if I had not turned the corner of my fiftieth year, when I first knew Tolstoy, I should not have been able to know him as fully as I did. He has been to me that final consciousness, which he speaks of so wisely in his

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essay on "Life." I came in it to the knowledge of myself in ways I had not dreamt of before, and began at least to discern my relations to the race, without which we are each nothing. The supreme art in literature had its highest effect in making me set art forever below humanity, and it is with the wish to offer the greatest homage to his heart and mind, which any man can pay another, that I close this record with the name of Lyof Tolstoy.





CRITICISM AND FICTION



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THE question of a final criterion for the appreciation of art is one that perpetually recurs to those interested in any sort of æsthetic endeavor. Mr. John Addington Symonds, in a chapter of *The Renaissance in Italy* treating of the Bolognese school of painting, which once had so great cry, and was vaunted the supreme exemplar of the grand style, but which he now believes fallen into lasting contempt for its emptiness and soullessness, seeks to determine whether there can be an enduring criterion or not; and his conclusion is applicable to literature as to the other arts. "Our hope," he says, "with regard to the unity of taste in the future then is, that all sentimental or academical seekings after the ideal having been abandoned, momentary theories founded upon idiosyncratic or temporary partialities exploded, and nothing accepted but what is solid and positive, the scientific spirit shall make men progressively more and more conscious of these *bleibende Verhältnisse*, more and more capable of living in the whole; also, that in proportion as we gain a firmer hold upon our own place in the world, we shall come to comprehend with more instinctive certitude what is simple, natural, and honest, welcoming with gladness all artistic products that exhibit these qualities. The perception of the enlightened man will then be the task of a healthy person who has made himself acquainted with the laws of evolution in art and in society, and is able to test the

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excellence of work in any stage from immaturity to decadence by discerning what there is of truth, sincerity, and natural vigor in it."

### I

THAT is to say, as I understand, that moods and tastes and fashions change; people fancy now this and now that; but what is unpretentious and what is true is always beautiful and good, and nothing else is so. This is not saying that fantastic and monstrous and artificial things do not please; everybody knows that they do please immensely for a time, and then, after the lapse of a much longer time, they have the charm of the rococo. Nothing is more curious than the charm that fashion has. Fashion in women's dress, almost every fashion, is somehow delightful, else it would never have been the fashion; but if any one will look through a collection of old fashion plates, he must own that most fashions have been ugly. A few, which could be readily instanced, have been very pretty, and even beautiful, but it is doubtful if these have pleased the greatest number of people. The ugly delights as well as the beautiful, and not merely because the ugly in fashion is associated with the young loveliness of the women who wear the ugly fashions, and wins a grace from them, not because the vast majority of mankind are tasteless, but for some cause that is not perhaps ascertainable. It is quite as likely to return in the fashions of our clothes and houses and furniture, and poetry and fiction and painting, as the beautiful, and it may be from an instinctive or a reasoned sense of this that some of the extreme naturalists have refused to make the old discrimination against it, or to regard the ugly as any less

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worthy of celebration in art than the beautiful; some of them, in fact, seem to regard it as rather more worthy, if anything. Possibly there is no absolutely ugly, no absolutely beautiful; or possibly the ugly contains always an element of the beautiful better adapted to the general appreciation than the more perfectly beautiful. This is a somewhat discouraging conjecture, but I offer it for no more than it is worth; and I do not pin my faith to the saying of one whom I heard denying, the other day, that a thing of beauty was a joy forever. He contended that Keats's line should have read, "Some things of beauty are sometimes joys forever," and that any assertion beyond this was too hazardous.

## II

I SHOULD, indeed, prefer another line of Keats's, if I were to profess any formulated creed, and should feel much safer with his "Beauty is Truth, Truth Beauty," than even with my friend's reformation of the more quoted verse. It brings us back to the solid ground taken by Mr. Symonds, which is not essentially different from that taken in the great Mr. Burke's *Essay on the Sublime and the Beautiful*—a singularly modern book, considering how long ago it was wrote (as the great Mr. Steele would have written the participle a little longer ago), and full of a certain well-mannered and agreeable instruction. In some things it is of that droll little eighteenth-century world, when philosophy had got the neat little universe into the hollow of its hand, and knew just what it was, and what it was for; but it is quite without arrogance. "As for those called critics," the author says, "they have generally sought the rule of the arts in the wrong place; they have sought

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among poems, pictures, engravings, statues, and buildings; but art can never give the rules that make an art. This is, I believe, the reason why artists in general, and poets principally, have been confined in so narrow a circle; they have been rather imitators of one another than of nature. Critics follow them, and therefore can do little as guides. I can judge but poorly of anything while I measure it by no other standard than itself. The true standard of the arts is in every man's power; and an easy observation of the most common, sometimes of the meanest things, in nature will give the truest lights, where the greatest sagacity and industry that slights such observation must leave us in the dark, or, what is worse, amuse and mislead us by false lights."

If this should happen to be true—and it certainly commends itself to acceptance—it might portend an immediate danger to the vested interests of criticism, only that it was written a hundred years ago; and we shall probably have the "sagacity and industry that slights the observation" of nature long enough yet to allow most critics the time to learn some more useful trade than criticism as they pursue it. Nevertheless, I am in hopes that the communistic era in taste foreshadowed by Burke is approaching, and that it will occur within the lives of men now overawed by the foolish old superstition that literature and art are anything but the expression of life, and are to be judged by any other test than that of their fidelity to it. The time is coming, I hope, when each new author, each new artist, will be considered, not in his proportion to any other author or artist, but in his relation to the human nature, known to us all, which it is his privilege, his high duty, to interpret. "The true standard of the artist is in every man's power" already, as Burke says; Michelangelo's "light of the piazza," the glance of the com-



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mon eye, is and always was the best light on a statue; Goethe's "boys and blackbirds" have in all ages been the real connoisseurs of berries; but hitherto the mass of common men have been afraid to apply their own simplicity, naturalness, and honesty to the appreciation of the beautiful. They have always cast about for the instruction of some one who professed to know better, and who browbeat wholesome common-sense into the self-distrust that ends in sophistication. They have fallen generally to the worst of this bad species, and have been "amused and misled" (how pretty that quaint old use of amuse is!) "by the false lights" of critical vanity and self-righteousness. They have been taught to compare what they see and what they read, not with the things that they have observed and known, but with the things that some other artist or writer has done. Especially if they have themselves the artistic impulse in any direction they are taught to form themselves, not upon life, but upon the masters who became masters only by forming themselves upon life. The seeds of death are planted in them, and they can produce only the still-born, the academic. They are not told to take their work into the public square and see if it seems true to the chance passer, but to test it by the work of the very men who refused and decried any other test of their own work. The young writer who attempts to report the phrase and carriage of every-day life, who tries to tell just how he has heard men talk and seen them look, is made to feel guilty of something low and unworthy by people who would like to have him show how Shakespeare's men talked and looked, or Scott's, or Thackeray's, or Balzac's, or Hawthorne's, or Dickens's; he is instructed to idealize his personages, that is, to take the life-likeness out of them, and put the book-likeness into them. He is approached in the

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spirit of the pedantry into which learning, much or little, always decays when it withdraws itself and stands apart from experience in an attitude of imagined superiority, and which would say with the same confidence to the scientist: "I see that you are looking at a grasshopper there which you have found in the grass, and I suppose you intend to describe it. Now don't waste your time and sin against culture in that way. I've got a grasshopper here, which has been evolved at considerable pains and expense out of the grasshopper in general; in fact, it's a type. It's made up of wire and card-board, very prettily painted in a conventional tint, and it's perfectly indestructible. It isn't very much like a real grasshopper, but it's a great deal nicer, and it's served to represent the notion of a grasshopper ever since man emerged from barbarism. You may say that it's artificial. Well, it is artificial; but then it's ideal too; and what you want to do is to cultivate the ideal. You'll find the books full of my kind of grasshopper, and scarcely a trace of yours in any of them. The thing that you are proposing to do is commonplace; but if you say that it isn't commonplace, for the very reason that it hasn't been done before, you'll have to admit that it's photographic."

As I said, I hope the time is coming when not only the artist, but the common, average man, who always "has the standard of the arts in his power," will have also the courage to apply it, and will reject the ideal grasshopper wherever he finds it, in science, in literature, in art, because it is not "simple, natural, and honest," because it is not like a real grasshopper. But I will own that I think the time is yet far off, and that the people who have been brought up on the ideal grasshopper, the heroic grasshopper, the impassioned grasshopper, the self-devoted, adventurous, good old roman-

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tic card-board grasshopper, must die out before the simple, honest, and natural grasshopper can have a fair field. I am in no haste to compass the end of these good people, whom I find in the mean time very amusing. It is delightful to meet one of them, either in print or out of it—some sweet elderly lady or excellent gentleman whose youth was pastured on the literature of thirty or forty years ago—and to witness the confidence with which they preach their favorite authors as all the law and the prophets. They have commonly read little or nothing since, or, if they have, they have judged it by a standard taken from these authors, and never dreamed of judging it by nature; they are destitute of the documents in the case of the later writers; they suppose that Balzac was the beginning of realism, and that Zola is its wicked end; they are quite ignorant, but they are ready to talk you down, if you differ from them, with an assumption of knowledge sufficient for any occasion. The horror, the resentment, with which they receive any question of their literary saints is genuine; you descend at once very far in the moral and social scale, and anything short of offensive personality is too good for you; it is expressed to you that you are one to be avoided, and put down even a little lower than you have naturally fallen.

These worthy persons are not to blame; it is part of their intellectual mission to represent the petrification of taste, and to preserve an image of a smaller and cruder and emptier world than we now live in, a world which was feeling its way towards the simple, the natural, the honest, but was a good deal “amused and misled” by lights now no longer mistakable for heavenly luminaries. They belong to a time, just passing away, when certain authors were considered authorities in certain kinds, when they must be accepted entire

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and not questioned in any particular. Now we are beginning to see and to say that no author is an authority except in those moments when he held his ear close to Nature's lips and caught her very accent. These moments are not continuous with any authors in the past, and they are rare with all. Therefore I am not afraid to say now that the greatest classics are sometimes not at all great, and that we can profit by them only when we hold them, like our meanest contemporaries, to a strict accounting, and verify their work by the standard of the arts which we all have in our power, the simple, the natural, and the honest.

Those good people must always have a hero, an idol of some sort, and it is droll to find Balzac, who suffered from their sort such bitter scorn and hate for his realism while he was alive, now become a fetich in his turn, to be shaken in the faces of those who will not blindly worship him. But it is no new thing in the history of literature: whatever is established is sacred with those who do not think. At the beginning of the century, when romance was making the same fight against effete classicism which realism is making to-day against effete romanticism, the Italian poet Monti declared that "the romantic was the cold grave of the Beautiful," just as the realistic is now supposed to be. The romantic of that day and the real of this are in certain degree the same. Romanticism then sought, as realism seeks now, to widen the bounds of sympathy, to level every barrier against æsthetic freedom, to escape from the paralysis of tradition. It exhausted itself in this impulse; and it remained for realism to assert that fidelity to experience and probability of motive are essential conditions of a great imaginative literature. It is not a new theory, but it has never before universally characterized literary endeavor. When realism becomes false to itself,

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when it heaps up facts merely, and maps life instead of picturing it, realism will perish too. Every true realist instinctively knows this, and it is perhaps the reason why he is careful of every fact, and feels himself bound to express or to indicate its meaning at the risk of over-moralizing. In life he finds nothing insignificant; all tells for destiny and character; nothing that God has made is contemptible. He cannot look upon human life and declare this thing or that thing unworthy of notice, any more than the scientist can declare a fact of the material world beneath the dignity of his inquiry. He feels in every nerve the equality of things and the unity of men; his soul is exalted, not by vain shows and shadows and ideals, but by realities, in which alone the truth lives. In criticism it is his business to break the images of false gods and misshapen heroes, to take away the poor silly toys that many grown people would still like to play with. He cannot keep terms with "Jack the Giant-killer" or "Puss-in-Boots," under any name or in any place, even when they reappear as the convict Vautrec, or the Marquis de Montrivaut, or the Sworn Thirteen Noblemen. He must say to himself that Balzac, when he imagined these monsters, was not Balzac, he was Dumas; he was not realistic, he was romanticistic.

### III

SUCH a critic will not respect Balzac's good work the less for condemning his bad work. He will easily account for the bad work historically, and when he has recognized it, will trouble himself no further with it. In his view no living man is a type, but a character; now noble, now ignoble; now grand, now little; complex, full of vicissitude. He will not expect Balzac to



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be always Balzac, and will be perhaps even more attracted to the study of him when he was trying to be Balzac than when he had become so. In *César Birotteau*, for instance, he will be interested to note how Balzac stood at the beginning of the great things that have followed since in fiction. There is an interesting likeness between his work in this and Nicolas Gogol's in *Dead Souls*, which serves to illustrate the simultaneity of the literary movement in men of such widely separated civilizations and conditions. Both represent their characters with the touch of exaggeration which typifies; but in bringing his story to a close, Balzac employs a beneficence unknown to the Russian, and almost as universal and as apt as that which smiles upon the fortunes of the good in the *Vicar of Wakefield*. It is not enough to have rehabilitated Birotteau pecuniarily and socially; he must make him die triumphantly, spectacularly, of an opportune hemorrhage, in the midst of the festivities which celebrate his restoration to his old home. Before this happens, human nature has been laid under contribution right and left for acts of generosity towards the righteous bankrupt; even the king sends him six thousand francs. It is very pretty; it is touching, and brings the lump into the reader's throat; but it is too much, and one perceives that Balzac lived too soon to profit by Balzac. The later men, especially the Russians, have known how to forbear the excesses of analysis, to withhold the weakly recurring descriptive and caressing epithets, to let the characters suffice for themselves. All this does not mean that *César Birotteau* is not a beautiful and pathetic story, full of shrewdly considered knowledge of men, and of a good art struggling to free itself from self-consciousness. But it does mean that Balzac, when he wrote it, was under the burden of the very traditions which he has



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helped fiction to throw off. He felt obliged to construct a mechanical plot, to surcharge his characters, to moralize openly and baldly; he permitted himself to "sympathize" with certain of his people, and to point out others for the abhorrence of his readers. This is not so bad in him as it would be in a novelist of our day. It is simply primitive and inevitable, and he is not to be judged by it.

### IV

IN the beginning of any art even the most gifted worker must be crude in his methods, and we ought to keep this fact always in mind when we turn, say, from the purblind worshippers of Scott to Scott himself, and recognize that he often wrote a style cumbrous and diffuse; that he was tediously analytical where the modern novelist is dramatic, and evolved his characters by means of long-winded explanation and commentary; that, except in the case of his lower-class personages, he made them talk as seldom man and never woman talked; that he was tiresomely descriptive; that on the simplest occasions he went about half a mile to express a thought that could be uttered in ten paces across lots; and that he trusted his readers' intuitions so little that he was apt to rub in his appeals to them. He was probably right: the generation which he wrote for was duller than this; slower-witted, æsthetically untrained, and in maturity not so apprehensive of an artistic intention as the children of to-day. All this is not saying Scott was not a great man; he was a great man, and a very great novelist as compared with the novelists who went before him. He can still amuse young people, but they ought to be instructed how false and how mistaken he often is, with his mediæval ideals, his blind Jacobitism, his

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intense devotion to aristocracy and royalty; his acquiescence in the division of men into noble and ignoble, patrician and plebeian, sovereign and subject, as if it were the law of God; for all which, indeed, he is not to blame as he would be if he were one of our contemporaries. Something of this is true of another master, greater than Scott in being less romantic, and inferior in being more German, namely, the great Goethe himself. He taught us, in novels otherwise now antiquated, and always full of German clumsiness, that it was false to good art—which is never anything but the reflection of life—to pursue and round the career of the persons introduced, whom he often allowed to appear and disappear in our knowledge as people in the actual world do. This is a lesson which the writers able to profit by it can never be too grateful for; and it is equally a benefaction to readers; but there is very little else in the conduct of the Goethean novels which is in advance of their time; this remains almost their sole contribution to the science of fiction. They are very primitive in certain characteristics, and unite with their calm, deep insight, an amusing helplessness in dramatization. “Wilhelm retired to his room, and indulged in the following reflections,” is a mode of analysis which would not be practised nowadays; and all that fancifulness of nomenclature in *Wilhelm Meister* is very drolly sentimental and feeble. The adventures with robbers seem as if dreamed out of books of chivalry, and the tendency to allegorization affects one like an endeavor on the author’s part to escape from the unrealities which he must have felt harassingly, German as he was. Mixed up with the shadows and illusions are honest, wholesome, every-day people, who have the air of wandering homelessly about among them, without definite direction; and the mists are full of a luminosity which, in spite of

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them, we know for common-sense and poetry. What is useful in any review of Goethe's methods is the recognition of the fact, which it must bring, that the greatest master cannot produce a masterpiece in a new kind. The novel was too recently invented in Goethe's day not to be, even in his hands, full of the faults of apprentice work.

### V

IN fact, a great master may sin against the "modesty of nature" in many ways, and I have felt this painfully in reading Balzac's romance — it is not worthy the name of novel — *Le Père Goriot*, which is full of a malarial restlessness, wholly alien to healthful art. After that exquisitely careful and truthful setting of his story in the shabby boarding-house, he fills the scene with figures jerked about by the exaggerated passions and motives of the stage. We cannot have a cynic reasonably wicked, disagreeable, egoistic; we must have a lurid villain of melodrama, a disguised convict, with a vast criminal organization at his command, and

"So dyèd double red"

in deed and purpose that he lights up the faces of the horrified spectators with his glare. A father fond of unworthy children, and leading a life of self-denial for their sake, as may probably and pathetically be, is not enough; there must be an imbecile, trembling dotard, willing to promote even the liaisons of his daughters to give them happiness and to teach the sublimity of the paternal instinct. The hero cannot sufficiently be a selfish young fellow, with alternating impulses of greed and generosity; he must superfluously intend a career of iniquitous splendor, and be swerved from it by noth-

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ing but the most cataclysmal interpositions. It can be said that without such personages the plot could not be transacted; but so much the worse for the plot. Such a plot had no business to be; and while actions so unnatural are imagined, no mastery can save fiction from contempt with those who really think about it. To Balzac it can be forgiven, not only because in his better mood he gave us such biographies as *Eugénie Grandet*, but because he wrote at a time when fiction was just beginning to verify the externals of life, to portray faithfully the outside of men and things. It was still held that in order to interest the reader the characters must be moved by the old romantic ideals; we were to be taught that "heroes" and "heroines" existed all around us, and that these abnormal beings needed only to be discovered in their several humble disguises, and then we should see every-day people actuated by the fine frenzy of the creatures of the poets. How false that notion was few but the critics, who are apt to be rather belated, need now be told. Some of these poor fellows, however, still contend that it ought to be done, and that human feelings and motives, as God made them and as men know them, are not good enough for novel-readers.

This is more explicable than would appear at first glance. The critics—and in speaking of them one always modestly leaves one's self out of the count, for some reason—when they are not elders ossified in tradition, are apt to be young people, and young people are necessarily conservative in their tastes and theories. They have the tastes and theories of their instructors, who perhaps caught the truth of their day, but whose routine life has been alien to any other truth. There is probably no chair of literature in this country from which the principles now shaping the literary expression

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of every civilized people are not denounced and confounded with certain objectionable French novels, or which teaches young men anything of the universal impulse which has given us the work, not only of Zola, but of Tourguenief and Tolstoy in Russia, of Björnson and Ibsen in Norway, of Valdés and Galdós in Spain, of Verga in Italy. Till these younger critics have learned to think as well as to write for themselves they will persist in heaving a sigh, more and more perfunctory, for the truth as it was in Sir Walter, and as it was in Dickens and in Hawthorne. Presently all will have been changed; they will have seen the new truth in larger and larger degree; and when it shall have become the old truth, they will perhaps see it all.

### VI

IN the mean time the average of criticism is not wholly bad with us. To be sure, the critic sometimes appears in the panoply of the savages whom we have supplanted on this continent; and it is hard to believe that his use of the tomahawk and the scalping-knife is a form of conservative surgery. It is still his conception of his office that he should assail those who differ with him in matters of taste or opinion; that he must be rude with those he does not like. It is too largely his superstition that because he likes a thing it is good, and because he dislikes a thing it is bad; the reverse is quite possibly the case, but he is yet indefinitely far from knowing that in affairs of taste his personal preference enters very little. Commonly he has no principles, but only an assortment of prepossessions for and against; and this otherwise very perfect character is sometimes uncandid to the verge of dishonesty. He



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seems not to mind misstating the position of any one he supposes himself to disagree with, and then attacking him for what he never said, or even implied; he thinks this is droll, and appears not to suspect that it is immoral. He is not tolerant; he thinks it a virtue to be intolerant; it is hard for him to understand that the same thing may be admirable at one time and deplorable at another; and that it is really his business to classify and analyze the fruits of the human mind very much as the naturalist classifies the objects of his study, rather than to praise or blame them; that there is a measure of the same absurdity in his trampling on a poem, a novel, or an essay that does not please him as in the botanist's grinding a plant underfoot because he does not find it pretty. He does not conceive that it is his business rather to identify the species and then explain how and where the specimen is imperfect and irregular. If he could once acquire this simple idea of his duty he would be much more agreeable company than he now is, and a more useful member of society; though considering the hard conditions under which he works, his necessity of writing hurriedly from an imperfect examination of far more books, on a greater variety of subjects, than he can even hope to read, the average American critic—the ordinary critic of commerce, so to speak—is even now very well indeed. Collectively he is more than this; for the joint effect of our criticism is the pretty thorough appreciation of any book submitted to it

## VII

THE misfortune rather than the fault of our individual critic is that he is the heir of the false theory and



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bad manners of the English school. The theory of that school has apparently been that almost any person of glib and lively expression is competent to write of almost any branch of polite literature; its manners are what we know. The American, whom it has largely formed, is by nature very glib and very lively, and commonly his criticism, viewed as imaginative work, is more agreeable than that of the Englishman; but it is, like the art of both countries, apt to be amateurish. In some degree our authors have freed themselves from English models; they have gained some notion of the more serious work of the Continent: but it is still the ambition of the American critic to write like the English critic, to show his wit if not his learning, to strive to eclipse the author under review rather than illustrate him. He has not yet caught on to the fact that it is really no part of his business to display himself, but that it is altogether his duty to place a book in such a light that the reader shall know its class, its function, its character. The vast good-nature of our people preserves us from the worst effects of this criticism without principles. Our critic, at his lowest, is rarely malignant; and when he is rude or untruthful, it is mostly without truculence; I suspect that he is often offensive without knowing that he is so. Now and then he acts simply under instruction from higher authority, and denounces because it is the tradition of his publication to do so. In other cases the critic is obliged to support his journal's repute for severity, or for wit, or for morality, though he may himself be entirely amiable, dull, and wicked; this necessity more or less warps his verdicts.

The worst is that he is personal, perhaps because it is so easy and so natural to be personal, and so instantly attractive. In this respect our criticism has not im-

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proved from the accession of numbers of ladies to its ranks, though we still hope so much from women in our politics when they shall come to vote. They have come to write, and with the effect to increase the amount of little-digging, which rather superabounded in our literary criticism before. They "know what they like"—that pernicious maxim of those who do not know what they ought to like—and they pass readily from censuring an author's performance to censuring him. They bring a stock of lively misapprehensions and prejudices to their work; they would rather have heard about than known about a book; and they take kindly to the public wish to be amused rather than edified. But neither have they so much harm in them: they, too, are more ignorant than malevolent.

### VIII

OUR criticism is disabled by the unwillingness of the critic to learn from an author, and his readiness to mistrust him. A writer passes his whole life in fitting himself for a certain kind of performance; the critic does not ask why, or whether the performance is good or bad, but if he does not like the kind, he instructs the writer to go off and do some other sort of thing—usually the sort that has been done already, and done sufficiently. If he could once understand that a man who has written the book he dislikes, probably knows infinitely more about its kind and his own fitness for doing it than any one else, the critic might learn something, and might help the reader to learn; but by putting himself in a false position, a position of superiority, he is of no use. He is not to suppose that an author has committed an offence against him by writing the kind of book he does

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not like; he will be far more profitably employed on behalf of the reader in finding out whether they had better not both like it. Let him conceive of an author as not in any wise on trial before him, but as a reflection of this or that aspect of life, and he will not be tempted to browbeat him or bully him.

The critic need not be impolite even to the youngest and weakest author. A little courtesy, or a good deal, a constant perception of the fact that a book is not a misdemeanor, a decent self-respect that must forbid the civilized man the savage pleasure of wounding, are what I would ask for our criticism, as something which will add sensibly to its present lustre.

### IX

I WOULD have my fellow-critics consider what they are really in the world for. The critic must perceive, if he will question himself more carefully, that his office is mainly to ascertain facts and traits of literature, not to invent or denounce them; to discover principles, not to establish them; to report, not to create.

It is so much easier to say that you like this or dislike that, than to tell why one thing is, or where another thing comes from, that many flourishing critics will have to go out of business altogether if the scientific method comes in, for then the critic will have to know something besides his own mind. He will have to know something of the laws of that mind, and of its generic history.

The history of all literature shows that even with the youngest and weakest author criticism is quite powerless against his will to do his own work in his own way; and if this is the case in the green wood, how much more

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in the dry! It has been thought by the sentimentalist that criticism, if it cannot cure, can at least kill, and Keats was long alleged in proof of its efficacy in this sort. But criticism neither cured nor killed Keats, as we all now very well know. It wounded, it cruelly hurt him, no doubt; and it is always in the power of the critic to give pain to the author—the meanest critic to the greatest author—for no one can help feeling a rudeness. But every literary movement has been violently opposed at the start, and yet never stayed in the least, or arrested, by criticism; every author has been condemned for his virtues, but in no wise changed by it. In the beginning he reads the critics; but presently perceiving that he alone makes or mars himself, and that they have no instruction for him, he mostly leaves off reading them, though he is always glad of their kindness or grieved by their harshness when he chances upon it. This, I believe, is the general experience, modified, of course, by exceptions.

Then, are we critics of no use in the world? I should not like to think that, though I am not quite ready to define our use. More than one sober thinker is inclining at present to suspect that æsthetically or specifically we are of no use, and that we are only useful historically; that we may register laws, but not enact them. I am not quite prepared to admit that æsthetic criticism is useless, though in view of its futility in any given instance it is hard to deny that it is so. It certainly seems as useless against a book that strikes the popular fancy, and prospers on in spite of condemnation by the best critics, as it is against a book which does not generally please, and which no critical favor can make acceptable. This is so common a phenomenon that I wonder it has never hitherto suggested to criticism that its point of view was altogether mistaken, and that it

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was really necessary to judge books not as dead things, but as living things—things which have an influence and a power irrespective of beauty and wisdom, and merely as expressions of actuality in thought and feeling. Perhaps criticism has a cumulative and final effect; perhaps it does some good we do not know of. It apparently does not affect the author directly, but it may reach him through the reader. It may in some cases enlarge or diminish his audience for a while, until he has thoroughly measured and tested his own powers. If criticism is to affect literature at all, it must be through the writers who have newly left the starting-point, and are reasonably uncertain of the race, not with those who have won it again and again in their own way.

### X

SOMETIMES it has seemed to me that the crudest expression of any creative art is better than the finest comment upon it. I have sometimes suspected that more thinking, more feeling certainly, goes to the creation of a poor novel than to the production of a brilliant criticism; and if any novel of our time fails to live a hundred years, will any censure of it live? Who can endure to read old reviews? One can hardly read them if they are in praise of one's own books.

The author neglected or overlooked need not despair for that reason, if he will reflect that criticism can neither make nor unmake authors; that there have not been greater books since criticism became an art than there were before; that in fact the greatest books seem to have come much earlier.

That which criticism seems most certainly to have done is to have put a literary consciousness into books



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unfelt in the early masterpieces, but unfelt now only in the books of men whose lives have been passed in activities, who have been used to employing language as they would have employed any implement, to effect an object, who have regarded a thing to be said as in no wise different from a thing to be done. In this sort I have seen no modern book so unconscious as Général Grant's *Personal Memoirs*. The author's one end and aim is to get the facts out in words. He does not cast about for phrases, but takes the word, whatever it is, that will best give his meaning, as if it were a man or a force of men for the accomplishment of a feat of arms. There is not a moment wasted in preening and prettifying, after the fashion of literary men; there is no thought of style, and so the style is good as it is in the *Book of Chronicles*, as it is in the *Pilgrim's Progress*, with a peculiar, almost plebeian, plainness at times. There is no more attempt at dramatic effect than there is at ceremonious pose; things happen in that tale of a mighty war as they happened in the mighty war itself, without setting, without artificial reliefs one after another, as if they were all of one quality and degree. Judgments are delivered with the same unimposing quiet; no awe surrounds the tribunal except that which comes from the weight and justice of the opinions; it is always an unaffected, unpretentious man who is talking; and throughout he prefers to wear the uniform of a private, with nothing of the general about him but the shoulder-straps, which he sometimes forgets.

## XI

CANON FARRAR'S opinions of literary criticism are very much to my liking, perhaps because when I read



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them I found them so like my own, already delivered in print. He tells the critics that "they are in no sense the legislators of literature, barely even its judges and police"; and he reminds them of Mr. Ruskin's saying that "a bad critic is probably the most mischievous person in the world," though a sense of their relative proportion to the whole of life would perhaps acquit the worst among them of this extreme of culpability. A bad critic is as bad a thing as can be, but, after all, his mischief does not carry very far. Otherwise it would be mainly the conventional books and not the original books which would survive; for the censor who imagines himself a law-giver can give law only to the imitative and never to the creative mind. Criticism has condemned whatever was, from time to time, fresh and vital in literature; it has always fought the new good thing in behalf of the old good thing; it has invariably fostered and encouraged the tame, the trite, the negative. Yet upon the whole it is the native, the novel, the positive that has survived in literature. Whereas, if bad criticism were the most mischievous thing in the world, in the full implication of the words, it must have been the tame, the trite, the negative, that survived.

Bad criticism is mischievous enough, however; and I think that much if not most current criticism as practised among the English and Americans is bad, is falsely principled, and is conditioned in evil. It is falsely principled because it is unprincipled, or without principles; and it is conditioned in evil because it is almost wholly anonymous. At the best its opinions are not conclusions from certain easily verifiable principles, but are effects from the worship of certain models. They are in so far quite worthless, for it is the very nature of things that the original mind cannot conform to models; it has its norm within itself; it can work only in its own

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way, and by its self-given laws. Criticism does not inquire whether a work is true to life, but tacitly or explicitly compares it with models, and tests it by them. If literary art travelled by any such road as criticism would have it go, it would travel in a vicious circle, and would arrive only at the point of departure. Yet this is the course that criticism must always prescribe when it attempts to give laws. Being itself artificial, it cannot conceive of the original except as the abnormal. It must altogether reconceive its office before it can be of use to literature. It must reduce this to the business of observing, recording, and comparing; to analyzing the material before it, and then synthetizing its impressions. Even then, it is not too much to say that literature as an art could get on perfectly well without it. Just as many good novels, poems, plays, essays, sketches, would be written if there were no such thing as criticism in the literary world, and no more bad ones.

But it will be long before criticism ceases to imagine itself a controlling force, to give itself airs of sovereignty, and to issue decrees. As it exists it is mostly a mischief, though not the greatest mischief; but it may be greatly ameliorated in character and softened in manner by the total abolition of anonymity.

I think it would be safe to say that in no other relation of life is so much brutality permitted by civilized society as in the criticism of literature and the arts. Canon Farrar is quite right in reproaching literary criticism with the uncandor of judging an author without reference to his aims; with pursuing certain writers from spite and prejudice, and mere habit; with misrepresenting a book by quoting a phrase or passage apart from the context; with magnifying misprints and careless expressions into important faults; with abusing an author for his opinions; with base and personal motives.

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Every writer of experience knows that certain critical journals will condemn his work without regard to its quality, even if it has never been his fortune to learn, as one author did from a repentent reviewer, that in a journal pretending to literary taste his books were given out for review with the caution, "Remember that the *Clarion* is opposed to Mr. Blank's books."

The final conclusion appears to be that the man, or even the young lady, who is given a gun, and told to shoot at some passer from behind a hedge, is placed in circumstances of temptation almost too strong for human nature.

### XII

As I have already intimated, I doubt the more lasting effects of unjust criticism. It is no part of my belief that Keats's fame was long delayed by it, or Wordsworth's, or Browning's. Something unwonted, unexpected, in the quality of each delayed his recognition; each was not only a poet, he was a revolution, a new order of things, to which the critical perceptions and habitudes had painfully to adjust themselves. But I have no question of the gross and stupid injustice with which these great men were used, and of the barbarization of the public mind by the sight of the wrong inflicted on them with impunity. This savage condition still persists in the toleration of anonymous criticism, an abuse that ought to be as extinct as the torture of witnesses. It is hard enough to treat a fellow-author with respect even when one has to address him, name to name, upon the same level, in plain day; swooping down upon him in the dark, panoplied in the authority of a great journal, it is impossible.

Every now and then some idealist comes forward and

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declares that you should say nothing in criticism of a man's book which you would not say of it to his face. But I am afraid this is asking too much. I am afraid it would put an end to all criticism; and that if it were practised literature would be left to purify itself. I have no doubt literature would do this; but in such a state of things there would be no provision for the critics. We ought not to destroy critics, we ought to reform them, or rather transform them, or turn them from the assumption of authority to a realization of their true function in the civilized state. They are no worse at heart, probably, than many others, and there are probably good husbands and tender fathers, loving daughters and careful mothers, among them.

It is evident to any student of human nature that the critic who is obliged to sign his review will be more careful of an author's feelings than he would if he could intangibly and invisibly deal with him as the representative of a great journal. He will be loath to have his name connected with those perversions and misstatements of an author's meaning in which the critic now indulges without danger of being turned out of honest company. He will be in some degree forced to be fair and just with a book he dislikes; he will not wish to misrepresent it when his sin can be traced directly to him in person; he will not be willing to voice the prejudice of a journal which is "opposed to the books" of this or that author; and the journal itself, when it is no longer responsible for the behavior of its critic, may find it interesting and profitable to give to an author his innings when he feels wronged by a reviewer and desires to right himself; it may even be eager to offer him the opportunity. We shall then, perhaps, frequently witness the spectacle of authors turning upon their reviewers, and improving their manners and

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morals by confronting them in public with the errors they may now commit with impunity. Many an author smarts under injuries and indignities which he might resent to the advantage of literature and civilization, if he were not afraid of being browbeaten by the journal whose nameless critic has outraged him.

The public is now of opinion that it involves loss of dignity to creative talent to try to right itself if wronged, but here we are without the requisite statistics. Creative talent may come off with all the dignity it went in with, and it may accomplish a very good work in demolishing criticism.

In any other relation of life the man who thinks himself wronged tries to right himself, violently, if he is a mistaken man, and lawfully if he is a wise man or a rich one, which is practically the same thing. But the author, dramatist, painter, sculptor, whose book, play, picture, statue, has been unfairly dealt with, as he believes, must make no effort to right himself with the public; he must bear his wrong in silence; he is even expected to grin and bear it, as if it were funny. Everybody understands that it is not funny to him, not in the least funny, but everybody says that he cannot make an effort to get the public to take his point of view without loss of dignity. This is very odd, but it is the fact, and I suppose that it comes from the feeling that the author, dramatist, painter, sculptor, has already said the best he can for his side in his book, play, picture, statue. This is partly true, and yet if he wishes to add something more to prove the critic wrong, I do not see how his attempt to do so should involve loss of dignity. The public, which is so jealous for his dignity, does not otherwise use him as if he were a very great and invaluable creature; if he fails, it lets him starve like any one else. I should say that he lost dignity or not as he



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behaved, in his effort to right himself, with petulance or with principle. If he betrayed a wounded vanity, if he impugned the motives and accused the lives of his critics, I should certainly feel that he was losing dignity; but if he temperately examined their theories, and tried to show where they were mistaken, I think he would not only gain dignity, but would perform a very useful work.

### XIII

I WOULD beseech the literary critics of our country to disabuse themselves of the mischievous notion that they are essential to the progress of literature in the way critics have imagined. Canon Farrar confesses that with the best will in the world to profit by the many criticisms of his books, he has never profited in the least by any of them; and this is almost the universal experience of authors. It is not always the fault of the critics. They sometimes deal honestly and fairly by a book, and not so often they deal adequately. But in making a book, if it is at all a good book, the author has learned all that is knowable about it, and every strong point and every weak point in it, far more accurately than any one else can possibly learn them. He has learned to do better than well for the future; but if his book is bad, he cannot be taught anything about it from the outside. It will perish; and if he has not the root of literature in him, he will perish as an author with it.

But what is it that gives tendency in art, then? What is it makes people like this at one time, and that at another? Above all, what makes a better fashion change for a worse; how can the ugly come to be preferred to the beautiful; in other words, how can an art decay?



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This question came up in my mind lately with regard to English fiction and its form, or rather its formlessness. How, for instance, could people who had once known the simple verity, the refined perfection of Miss Austen, enjoy anything less refined and less perfect?

With her example before them, why should not English novelists have gone on writing simply, honestly, artistically, ever after? One would think it must have been impossible for them to do otherwise, if one did not remember, say, the lamentable behavior of the actors who support Mr. Jefferson, and their theatricality in the very presence of his beautiful naturalness. It is very difficult, that simplicity, and nothing is so hard as to be honest, as the reader, if he has ever happened to try it, must know. "The big bow-wow I can do myself, like any one going," said Scott, but he owned that the exquisite touch of Miss Austen was denied him; and it seems certainly to have been denied in greater or less measure to all her successors. But though reading and writing come by nature, as Dogberry justly said, a taste in them may be cultivated, or once cultivated, it may be preserved; and why was it not so among those poor islanders? One does not ask such things in order to be at the pains of answering them one's self, but with the hope that some one else will take the trouble to do so, and I propose to be rather a silent partner in the enterprise, which I shall leave mainly to Señor Armando Palacio Valdés. This delightful author will, however, only be able to answer my question indirectly from the essay on fiction with which he prefaces one of his novels, the charming story of *The Sister of San Sulpizio*, and I shall have some little labor in fitting his saws to my instances. It is an essay which I wish every one intending to read, or even to write, a novel, might acquaint himself with; for it con-

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tains some of the best and clearest things which have been said of the art of fiction in a time when nearly all who practise it have turned to talk about it.

Señor Valdés is a realist, but a realist according to his own conception of realism; and he has some words of just censure for the French naturalists, whom he finds unnecessarily, and suspects of being sometimes even mercenarily, nasty. He sees the wide difference that passes between this naturalism and the realism of the English and Spanish; and he goes somewhat further than I should go in condemning it. "The French naturalism represents only a moment, and an insignificant part of life. . . . It is characterized by sadness and narrowness. The prototype of this literature is the *Madame Bovary* of Flaubert. I am an admirer of this novelist, and especially of this novel; but often in thinking of it I have said, How dreary would literature be if it were no more than this! There is something antipathetic and gloomy and limited in it, as there is in modern French life;" but this seems to me exactly the best possible reason for its being. I believe with Señor Valdés that "no literature can live long without joy," not because of its mistaken æsthetics, however, but because no civilization can live long without joy. The expression of French life will change when French life changes; and French naturalism is better at its worst than French unnaturalism at its best. "No one," as Señor Valdés truly says, "can rise from the perusal of a naturalistic book . . . without a vivid desire to escape" from the wretched world depicted in it, "and a purpose, more or less vague, of helping to better the lot and morally elevate the abject beings who figure in it. Naturalistic art, then, is not immoral in itself, for then it would not merit the name of art; for though it is not the business of art to preach morality, still I think

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that, resting on a divine and spiritual principle, like the idea of the beautiful, it is perforce moral. I hold much more immoral other books which, under a glamour of something spiritual and beautiful and sublime, portray the vices in which we are allied to the beasts. Such, for example, are the works of Octave Feuillet, Arsène Houssaye, Georges Ohnet, and other contemporary novelists much in vogue among the higher classes of society."

But what is this idea of the beautiful which art rests upon, and so becomes moral? "The man of our time," says Señor Valdés, "wishes to know everything and enjoy everything: he turns the objective of a powerful equatorial towards the heavenly spaces where gravitates the infinitude of the stars, just as he applies the microscope to the infinitude of the smallest insects; for their laws are identical. His experience, united with intuition, has convinced him that in nature there is neither great nor small; all is equal. All is equally grand, all is equally just, all is equally beautiful, because all is equally divine." But beauty, Señor Valdés explains, exists in the human spirit, and is the beautiful effect which it receives from the true meaning of things; it does not matter what the things are, and it is the function of the artist who feels this effect to impart it to others. I may add that there is no joy in art except this perception of the meaning of things and its communication; when you have felt it, and portrayed it in a poem, a symphony, a novel, a statue, a picture, an edifice, you have fulfilled the purpose for which you were born an artist.

The reflection of exterior nature in the individual spirit, Señor Valdés believes to be the fundamental of art. "To say, then, that the artist must not copy but create is nonsense, because he can in no wise copy, and in no wise create. He who sets deliberately about modi-

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fyng nature, shows that he has not felt her beauty, and therefore cannot make others feel it. The puerile desire which some artists without genius manifest to go about selecting in nature, not what seems to them beautiful, but what they think will seem beautiful to others, and rejecting what may displease them, ordinarily produces cold and insipid works. For, instead of exploring the illimitable fields of reality, they cling to the forms invented by other artists who have succeeded, and they make statues of statues, poems of poems, novels of novels. It is entirely false that the great romantic, symbolic, or classic poets modified nature; such as they have expressed her they felt her; and in this view they are as much realists as ourselves. In like manner if in the realistic tide that now bears us on there are some spirits who feel nature in another way, in the romantic way, or the classic way, they would not falsify her in expressing her so. Only those falsify her who, without feeling classic wise or romantic wise, set about being classic or romantic, wearisomely reproducing the models of former ages; and equally those who, without sharing the sentiment of realism, which now prevails, force themselves to be realists merely to follow the fashion."

The pseudo-realists, in fact, are the worse offenders, to my thinking, for they sin against the living; whereas those who continue to celebrate the heroic adventures of "Puss-in-Boots" and the hair-breadth escapes of "Tom Thumb," under various aliases, only cast disrespect upon the immortals who have passed beyond these noises.

### XIV

"THE principal cause," our Spaniard says, "of the decadence of contemporary literature is found, to my

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thinking, in the vice which has been very graphically called effectism, or the itch of awaking at all cost in the reader vivid and violent emotions, which shall do credit to the invention and originality of the writer. This vice has its roots in human nature itself, and more particularly in that of the artist; he has always something feminine in him, which tempts him to coquet with the reader, and display qualities that he thinks will astonish him, as women laugh for no reason, to show their teeth when they have them white and small and even, or lift their dresses to show their feet when there is no mud in the street. . . . What many writers nowadays wish, is to produce an effect, grand and immediate, to play the part of geniuses. For this they have learned that it is only necessary to write exaggerated works in any sort, since the vulgar do not ask that they shall be quietly made to think and feel, but that they shall be startled; and among the vulgar, of course, I include the great part of those who write literary criticism, and who constitute the worst vulgar, since they teach what they do not know. . . . There are many persons who suppose that the highest proof an artist can give of his fantasy is the invention of a complicated plot, spiced with perils, surprises, and suspenses; and that anything else is the sign of a poor and tepid imagination. And not only people who seem cultivated, but are not so, suppose this, but there are sensible persons, and even sagacious and intelligent critics, who sometimes allow themselves to be hoodwinked by the dramatic mystery and the surprising and fantastic scenes of a novel. They own it is all false; but they admire the imagination, what they call the 'power' of the author. Very well; all I have to say is that the 'power' to dazzle with strange incidents, to entertain with complicated plots and impossible characters, now belongs to



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some hundreds of writers in Europe; while there are not much above a dozen who know how to interest with the ordinary events of life, and by the portrayal of characters truly human. If the former is a talent, it must be owned that it is much commoner than the latter. . . . If we are to rate novelists according to their fecundity, or the riches of their invention, we must put Alexander Dumas above Cervantes. Cervantes wrote a novel with the simplest plot, without belying much or little the natural and logical course of events. This novel which was called *Don Quixote*, is perhaps the greatest work of human wit. Very well; the same Cervantes, mischievously influenced afterwards by the ideas of the vulgar, who were then what they are now and always will be, attempted to please them by a work giving a lively proof of his inventive talent, and wrote the *Persiles and Sigismunda*, where the strange incidents, the vivid complications, the surprises, the pathetic scenes, succeed one another so rapidly and constantly that it really fatigues you. . . . But in spite of this flood of invention, imagine," says Señor Valdés, "the place that Cervantes would now occupy in the heaven of art, if he had never written *Don Quixote*," but only *Persiles and Sigismunda*!

From the point of view of modern English criticism, which likes to be melted, and horrified, and astonished, and blood-curdled, and goose-fleshed, no less than to be "chippered up" in fiction, Señor Valdés were indeed incorrigible. Not only does he despise the novel of complicated plot, and everywhere prefer *Don Quixote* to *Persiles and Sigismunda*, but he has a lively contempt for another class of novels much in favor with the gentilities of all countries. He calls their writers "novelists of the world," and he says that more than any others they have the rage of effectism. "They do



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not seek to produce effect by novelty and invention in plot . . . they seek it in character. For this end they begin by deliberately falsifying human feelings, giving them a paradoxical appearance completely inadmissible. . . . Love that disguises itself as hate, incomparable energy under the cloak of weakness, virginal innocence under the aspect of malice and impudence, wit masquerading as folly, etc., etc. By this means they hope to make an effect of which they are incapable through the direct, frank, and conscientious study of character." He mentions Octave Feuillet as the greatest offender in this sort among the French, and Bulwer among the English; but Dickens is full of it (*Boffin* in *Our Mutual Friend* will suffice for all example), and most drama is witness of the result of this effectism when allowed full play.

But what, then, if he is not pleased with Dumas, or with the effectists who delight genteel people at all the theatres, and in most of the romances, what, I ask, will satisfy this extremely difficult Spanish gentleman? He would pretend, very little. Give him simple, life-like character; that is all he wants. "For me, the only condition of character is that it be human, and that is enough. If I wished to know what was human, I should study humanity."

But, Señor Valdés, Señor Valdés! Do not you know that this small condition of yours implies in its fulfilment hardly less than the gift of the whole earth? You merely ask that the character portrayed in fiction be human; and you suggest that the novelist should study humanity if he would know whether his personages are human. This appears to me the cruelest irony, the most sarcastic affectation of humility. If you had asked that character in fiction be superhuman, or subterhuman, or preterhuman, or intrahuman, and had bidden

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the novelist go, not to humanity, but the humanities, for the proof of his excellence, it would have been all very easy. The books are full of those "creations," of every pattern, of all ages, of both sexes; and it is so much handier to get at books than to get at men; and when you have portrayed "passion" instead of feeling, and used "power" instead of common-sense, and shown yourself a "genius" instead of an artist, the applause is so prompt and the glory so cheap, that really anything else seems wickedly wasteful of one's time. One may not make one's reader enjoy or suffer nobly, but one may give him the kind of pleasure that arises from conjuring, or from a puppet-show, or a modern stage-play, and leave him, if he is an old fool, in the sort of stupor that comes from hitting the pipe; or if he is a young fool, half crazed with the spectacle of qualities and impulses like his own in an apotheosis of achievement and fruition far beyond any earthly experience.

But apparently Señor Valdés would not think this any great artistic result. "Things that appear ugliest in reality to the spectator who is not an artist, are transformed into beauty and poetry when the spirit of the artist possesses itself of them. We all take part every day in a thousand domestic scenes, every day we see a thousand pictures in life, that do not make any impression upon us, or if they make any it is one of repugnance; but let the novelist come, and without betraying the truth, but painting them as they appear to his vision, he produces a most interesting work, whose perusal enchants us. That which in life left us indifferent, or repelled us, in art delights us. Why? Simply because the artist has made us see the idea that resides in it. Let not the novelists, then, endeavor to add anything to reality, to turn it and twist it, to restrict it. Since nature has endowed them with this

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precious gift of discovering ideas in things, their work will be beautiful if they paint these as they appear. But if the reality does not impress them, in vain will they strive to make their work impress others."

### XV

WHICH brings us again, after this long way about, to Jane Austen and her novels, and that troublesome question about them. She was great and they were beautiful, because she and they were honest, and dealt with nature nearly a hundred years ago as realism deals with it to-day. Realism is nothing more and nothing less than the truthful treatment of material, and Jane Austen was the first and the last of the English novelists to treat material with entire truthfulness. Because she did this, she remains the most artistic of the English novelists, and alone worthy to be matched with the great Scandinavian and Slavic and Latin artists. It is not a question of intellect, or not wholly that. The English have mind enough; but they have not taste enough; or, rather, their taste has been perverted by their false criticism, which is based upon personal preference, and not upon principle; which instructs a man to think that what he likes is good, instead of teaching him first to distinguish what is good before he likes it. The art of fiction, as Jane Austen knew it, declined from her through Scott, and Bulwer, and Dickens, and Charlotte Brontë, and Thackeray, and even George Eliot, because the mania of romanticism had seized upon all Europe, and these great writers could not escape the taint of their time; but it has shown few signs of recovery in England, because English criticism, in the presence of the Continental masterpieces, has continued

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provincial and special and personal, and has expressed a love and a hate which had to do with the quality of the artist rather than the character of his work. It was inevitable that in their time the English romanticists should treat, as Señor Valdés says, "the barbarous customs of the Middle Ages, softening and distorting them, as Walter Scott and his kind did;" that they should "devote themselves to falsifying nature, refining and subtilizing sentiment, and modifying psychology after their own fancy," like Bulwer and Dickens, as well as like Rousseau and Madame de Staël, not to mention Balzac, the worst of all that sort at his worst. This was the natural course of the disease; but it really seems as if it were their criticism that was to blame for the rest: not, indeed, for the performance of this writer or that, for criticism can never affect the actual doing of a thing; but for the esteem in which this writer or that is held through the perpetuation of false ideals. The only observer of English middle-class life since Jane Austen worthy to be named with her was not George Eliot, who was first ethical and then artistic, who transcended her in everything but the form and method most essential to art, and there fell hopelessly below her. It was Anthony Trollope who was most like her in simple honesty and instinctive truth, as unphilosophized as the light of common day; but he was so warped from a wholesome ideal as to wish at times to be like Thackeray, and to stand about in his scene, talking it over with his hands in his pockets, interrupting the action, and spoiling the illusion in which alone the truth of art resides. Mainly, his instinct was too much for his ideal, and with a low view of life in its civic relations and a thoroughly bourgeois soul, he yet produced works whose beauty is surpassed only by the effect of a more poetic writer in the novels of Thomas Hardy. Yet if

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a vote of English criticism even at this late day, when all Continental Europe has the light of æsthetic truth, could be taken, the majority against these artists would be overwhelmingly in favor of a writer who had so little artistic sensibility, that he never hesitated on any occasion, great or small, to make a foray among his characters, and catch them up to show them to the reader and tell him how beautiful or ugly they were; and cry out over<sup>1</sup> their amazing properties.

### XVI

“How few materials,” says Emerson, “are yet used by our arts! The mass of creatures and of qualities are still hid and expectant,” and to break new ground is still one of the uncommonest and most heroic of the virtues. The artists are not alone to blame for the timidity that keeps them in the old furrows of the worn-out fields; most of those whom they live to please, or live by pleasing, prefer to have them remain there; it wants rare virtue to appreciate what is new, as well as to invent it; and the “easy things to understand” are the conventional things. This is why the ordinary English novel, with its hackneyed plot, scenes, and figures, is more comfortable to the ordinary American than an American novel, which deals, at its worst, with comparatively new interests and motives. To adjust one’s self to the enjoyment of these costs an intellectual effort, and an intellectual effort is what no ordinary person likes to make. It is only the extraordinary person who can say, with Emerson: “I ask not for the great, the remote, the romantic. . . . I embrace the common; I sit at the feet of the familiar and the low. . . . Man is surprised to find that things near are not



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less beautiful and wondrous than things remote. . . . The perception of the worth of the vulgar is fruitful in discoveries. . . . The foolish man wonders at the unusual, but the wise man at the usual. . . . To-day always looks mean to the thoughtless; but to-day is a king in disguise. . . . Banks and tariffs, the newspaper and caucus, Methodism and Unitarianism, are flat and dull to dull people, but rest on the same foundations of wonder as the town of Troy and the temple of Delphos."

Perhaps we ought not to deny their town of Troy and their temple of Delphos to the dull people; but if we ought, and if we did, they would still insist upon having them. An English novel, full of titles and rank, is apparently essential to the happiness of such people; their weak and childish imagination is at home in its familiar environment; they know what they are reading; the fact that it is hash many times warmed over reassures them; whereas a story of our own life, honestly studied and faithfully represented, troubles them with varied misgiving. They are not sure that it is literature; they do not feel that it is good society; its characters, so like their own, strike them as commonplace; they say they do not wish to know such people.

Everything in England is appreciable to the literary sense, while the sense of the literary worth of things in America is still faint and weak with most people, with the vast majority who "ask for the great, the remote, the romantic," who cannot "embrace the common," cannot "sit at the feet of the familiar and the low," in the good company of Emerson. We are all, or nearly all, struggling to be distinguished from the mass, and to be set apart in select circles and upper classes like the fine people we have read about. We are really a mixture of the plebeian ingredients of the whole world;



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but that is not bad; our vulgarity consists in trying to ignore "the worth of the vulgar," in believing that the superfine is better.

### XVII

ANOTHER Spanish novelist of our day, whose books have given me great pleasure, is so far from being of the same mind of Señor Valdés about fiction that he boldly declares himself, in the preface to his *Pepita Ximenez*, "an advocate of art for art's sake." I heartily agree with him that it is "in very bad taste, always impertinent and often pedantic, to attempt to prove theses by writing stories," and yet if it is true that "the object of a novel should be to charm through a faithful representation of human actions and human passions, and to create by this fidelity to nature a beautiful work," and if "the creation of the beautiful" is solely "the object of art," it never was and never can be solely its effect as long as men are men and women are women. If ever the race is resolved into abstract qualities, perhaps this may happen; but till then the finest effect of the "beautiful" will be ethical and not æsthetic merely. Morality penetrates all things, it is the soul of all things. Beauty may clothe it on, whether it is false morality and an evil soul, or whether it is true and a good soul. In the one case the beauty will corrupt, and in the other it will edify, and in either case it will infallibly and inevitably have an ethical effect, now light, now grave, according as the thing is light or grave. We cannot escape from this; we are shut up to it by the very conditions of our being. For the moment, it is charming to have a story end happily, but after one has lived a certain number of

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years, and read a certain number of novels, it is not the prosperous or adverse fortune of the characters that affects one, but the good or bad faith of the novelist in dealing with them. Will he play us false or will he be true in the operation of this or that principle involved? I cannot hold him to less account than this: he must be true to what life has taught me is the truth, and after that he may let any fate betide his people; the novel ends well that ends faithfully. The greater his power, the greater his responsibility before the human conscience, which is God in us. But men come and go, and what they do in their limited physical lives is of comparatively little moment; it is what they say that really survives to bless or to ban; and it is the evil which Wordsworth felt in Goethe, that must long survive him. There is a kind of thing—a kind of metaphysical lie against righteousness and common-sense—which is called the Unmoral, and is supposed to be different from the Immoral; and it is this which is supposed to cover many of the faults of Goethe. His *Wilhelm Meister*, for example, is so far removed within the region of the “ideal” that its unprincipled, its evil-principled, tenor in regard to women is pronounced “unmorality,” and is therefore inferably harmless. But no study of Goethe is complete without some recognition of the qualities which caused Wordsworth to hurl the book across the room with an indignant perception of its sensuality. For the sins of his life Goethe was perhaps sufficiently punished in his life by his final marriage with Christiane; for the sins of his literature many others must suffer. I do not despair, however, of the day when the poor honest herd of mankind shall give universal utterance to the universal instinct, and shall hold selfish power in politics, in art, in religion, for the devil that it is; when neither its

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crazy pride nor its amusing vanity shall be flattered by the puissance of the "geniuses" who have forgotten their duty to the common weakness, and have abused it to their own glory. In that day we shall shudder at many monsters of passion, of self-indulgence, of heartlessness, whom we still more or less openly adore for their "genius," and shall account no man worshipful whom we do not feel and know to be good. The spectacle of strenuous achievement will then not dazzle or mislead; it will not sanctify or palliate iniquity; it will only render it the more hideous and pitiable.

In fact, the whole belief in "genius" seems to me rather a mischievous superstition, and if not mischievous always, still always a superstition. From the account of those who talk about it, "genius" appears to be the attribute of a sort of very potent and admirable prodigy which God has created out of the common for the astonishment and confusion of the rest of us poor human beings. But do they really believe it? Do they mean anything more or less than the Mastery which comes to any man according to his powers and diligence in any direction? If not, why not have an end of the superstition which has caused our race to go on so long writing and reading of the difference between talent and genius? It is within the memory of middle-aged men that the Maelstrom existed in the belief of the geographers, but we now get on perfectly well without it; and why should we still suffer under the notion of "genius" which keeps so many poor little authorlings trembling in question whether they have it, or have only "talent"?

One of the greatest captains who ever lived—a plain, taciturn, unaffected soul—has told the story of his wonderful life as unconsciously as if it were all an every-day affair, not different from other lives, except

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as a great exigency of the human race gave it importance. So far as he knew, he had no natural aptitude for arms, and certainly no love for the calling. But he went to West Point because, as he quaintly tells us, his father "rather thought he would go"; and he fought through one war with credit, but without glory. The other war, which was to claim his powers and his science, found him engaged in the most prosaic of peaceful occupations; he obeyed its call because he loved his country, and not because he loved war. All the world knows the rest, and all the world knows that greater military mastery has not been shown than his campaigns illustrated. He does not say this in his book, or hint it in any way; he gives you the facts, and leaves them with you. But the *Personal Memoirs of U. S. Grant*, written as simply and straightforwardly as his battles were fought, couched in the most unpretentious phrase, with never a touch of grandiosity or attitudinizing, familiar, homely in style, form a great piece of literature, because great literature is nothing more nor less than the clear expression of minds that have something great in them, whether religion, or beauty, or deep experience. Probably Grant would have said that he had no more vocation to literature than he had to war. He owns, with something like contrition, that he used to read a great many novels; but we think he would have denied the soft impeachment of literary power. Nevertheless, he shows it, as he showed military power, unexpectedly, almost miraculously. All the conditions here, then, are favorable to supposing a case of "genius." Yet who would trifle with that great heir of fame, that plain, grand, manly soul, by speaking of "genius" and him together? Who calls Washington a genius? or Franklin, or Bismarck, or Cavour, or Columbus, or Luther, or Darwin, or Lincoln? Were

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these men second-rate in their way? Or is "genius" that indefinable, preternatural quality, sacred to the musicians, the painters, the sculptors, the actors, the poets, and above all, the poets? Or is it that the poets, having most of the say in this world, abuse it to shameless self-flattery, and would persuade the inarticulate classes that they are on peculiar terms of confidence with the deity?

### XVIII

IN General Grant's confession of novel-reading there is a sort of inference that he had wasted his time, or else the guilty conscience of the novelist in me imagines such an inference. But however this may be, there is certainly no question concerning the intention of a correspondent who once wrote to me after reading some rather bragging claims I had made for fiction as a mental and moral means. "I have very grave doubts," he said, "as to the whole list of magnificent things that you seem to think novels have done for the race, and can witness in myself many evil things which they have done for me. Whatever in my mental make-up is wild and visionary, whatever is untrue, whatever is injurious, I can trace to the perusal of some work of fiction. Worse than that, they beget such high-strung and supersensitive ideas of life that plain industry and plodding perseverance are despised, and matter-of-fact poverty, or every-day, commonplace distress, meets with no sympathy, if indeed noticed at all, by one who has wept over the impossibly accumulated sufferings of some gaudy hero or heroine."

I am not sure that I had the controversy with this correspondent that he seemed to suppose; but novels are now so fully accepted by every one pretending to culti-



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vated taste—and they really form the whole intellectual life of such immense numbers of people, without question of their influence, good or bad, upon the mind—that it is refreshing to have them frankly denounced, and to be invited to revise one's ideas and feelings in regard to them. A little honesty, or a great deal of honesty, in this quest will do the novel, as we hope yet to have it, and as we have already begun to have it, no harm; and for my own part I will confess that I believe fiction in the past to have been largely injurious, as I believe the stage-play to be still almost wholly injurious, through its falsehood, its folly, its wantonness, and its aimlessness. It may be safely assumed that most of the novel-reading which people fancy an intellectual pastime is the emptiest dissipation, hardly more related to thought or the wholesome exercise of the mental faculties than opium-eating; in either case the brain is drugged, and left weaker and crazier for the debauch. If this may be called the negative result of the fiction habit, the positive injury that most novels work is by no means so easily to be measured in the case of young men whose character they help so much to form or deform, and the women of all ages whom they keep so much in ignorance of the world they misrepresent. Grown men have little harm from them, but in the other cases, which are the vast majority, they hurt because they are not true—not because they are malevolent, but because they are idle lies about human nature and the social fabric, which it behooves us to know and to understand, that we may deal justly with ourselves and with one another. One need not go so far as our correspondent, and trace to the fiction habit “whatever is wild and visionary, whatever is untrue, whatever is injurious,” in one's life; bad as the fiction habit is it is probably not responsible for the whole sum



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of evil in its victims, and I believe that if the reader will use care in choosing from this fungus-growth with which the fields of literature teem every day, he may nourish himself as with the true mushroom, at no risk from the poisonous species.

The tests are very plain and simple, and they are perfectly infallible. If a novel flatters the passions, and exalts them above the principles, it is poisonous; it may not kill, but it will certainly injure; and this test will alone exclude an entire class of fiction, of which eminent examples will occur to all. Then the whole spawn of so-called unmoral romances, which imagine a world where the sins of sense are unvisited by the penalties following, swift or slow, but inexorably sure, in the real world, are deadly poison: these do kill. The novels that merely tickle our prejudices and lull our judgment, or that coddle our sensibilities or pamper our gross appetite for the marvellous, are not so fatal, but they are innutritious, and clog the soul with unwholesome vapors of all kinds. No doubt they too help to weaken the moral fibre, and make their readers indifferent to "plodding perseverance and plain industry," and to "matter-of-fact poverty and commonplace distress."

Without taking them too seriously, it still must be owned that the "gaudy hero and heroine" are to blame for a great deal of harm in the world. That heroine long taught by example, if not precept, that Love, or the passion or fancy she mistook for it, was the chief interest of a life, which is really concerned with a great many other things; that it was lasting in the way she knew it; that it was worthy of every sacrifice, and was altogether a finer thing than prudence, obedience, reason; that love alone was glorious and beautiful, and these were mean and ugly in comparison with it. More

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lately she has begun to idolize and illustrate Duty, and she is hardly less mischievous in this new rôle, opposing duty, as she did love, to prudence, obedience, and reason. The stock hero, whom, if we met him, we could not fail to see was a most deplorable person, has undoubtedly imposed himself upon the victims of the fiction habit as admirable. With him, too, love was and is the great affair, whether in its old romantic phase of chivalrous achievement or manifold suffering for love's sake, or its more recent development of the "virile," the bullying, and the brutal, or its still more recent agonies of self-sacrifice, as idle and useless as the moral experiences of the insane asylums. With his vain posturings and his ridiculous splendor he is really a painted barbarian, the prey of his passions and his delusions, full of obsolete ideals, and the motives and ethics of a savage, which the guilty author of his being does his best—or his worst—in spite of his own light and knowledge, to foist upon the reader as something generous and noble. I am not merely bringing this charge against that sort of fiction which is beneath literature and outside of it, "the shoreless lakes of ditch-water," whose miasms fill the air below the empyrean where the great ones sit; but I am accusing the work of some of the most famous, who have, in this instance or in that, sinned against the truth, which can alone exalt and purify men. I do not say that they have constantly done so, or even commonly done so; but that they have done so at all marks them as of the past, to be read with the due historical allowance for their epoch and their conditions. For I believe that, while inferior writers will and must continue to imitate them in their foibles and their errors, no one hereafter will be able to achieve greatness who is false to humanity, either in its facts or its duties. The light of

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civilization has already broken even upon the novel, and no conscientious man can now set about painting an image of life without perpetual question of the verity of his work, and without feeling bound to distinguish so clearly that no reader of his may be misled, between what is right and what is wrong, what is noble and what is base, what is health and what is perdition, in the actions and the characters he portrays.

The fiction that aims merely to entertain—the fiction that is to serious fiction as the opera-bouffe, the ballet, and the pantomime are to the true drama—need not feel the burden of this obligation so deeply; but even such fiction will not be gay or trivial to any reader's hurt, and criticism should hold it to account if it passes from painting to teaching folly.

I confess that I do not care to judge any work of the imagination without first of all applying this test to it. We must ask ourselves before we ask anything else, Is it true?—true to the motives, the impulses, the principles that shape the life of actual men and women? This truth, which necessarily includes the highest morality and the highest artistry—this truth given, the book cannot be wicked and cannot be weak; and without it all graces of style and feats of invention and cunning of construction are so many superfluities of naughtiness. It is well for the truth to have all these, and shine in them, but for falsehood they are merely meretricious, the bedizenment of the wanton; they atone for nothing, they count for nothing. But in fact they come naturally of truth, and grace it without solicitation; they are added unto it. In the whole range of fiction I know of no true picture of life—that is, of human nature—which is not also a masterpiece of literature, full of divine and natural beauty. It may have no touch or tint of this special civilization

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or of that; it had better have this local color well ascertained; but the truth is deeper and finer than aspects, and if the book is true to what men and women know of one another's souls it will be true enough, and it will be great and beautiful. It is the conception of literature as something apart from life, superfinely aloof, which makes it really unimportant to the great mass of mankind, without a message or a meaning for them; and it is the notion that a novel may be false in its portrayal of causes and effects that makes literary art contemptible even to those whom it amuses, that forbids them to regard the novelist as a serious or right-minded person. If they do not in some moment of indignation cry out against all novels, as my correspondent does, they remain besotted in the fume of the delusions purveyed to them, with no higher feeling for the author than such maudlin affection as the frequenter of an opium-joint perhaps knows for the attendant who fills his pipe with the drug.

Or, as in the case of another correspondent who writes that in his youth he "read a great many novels, but always regarded it as an amusement, like horse-racing and card-playing," for which he had no time when he entered upon the serious business of life, it renders them merely contemptuous. His view of the matter may be commended to the brotherhood and sisterhood of novelists as full of wholesome if bitter suggestion; and I urge them not to dismiss it with high literary scorn as that of some Bœotian dull to the beauty of art. Refuse it as we may, it is still the feeling of the vast majority of people for whom life is earnest, and who find only a distorted and misleading likeness of it in our books. We may fold ourselves in our scholars' gowns, and close the doors of our studies, and affect to despise this rude voice; but we cannot

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shut it out. It comes to us from wherever men are at work, from wherever they are truly living, and accuses us of unfaithfulness, of triviality, of mere stage-play; and none of us can escape conviction except he prove himself worthy of his time—a time in which the great masters have brought literature back to life, and filled its ebbing veins with the red tides of reality. We cannot all equal them; we need not copy them; but we can all go to the sources of their inspiration and their power; and to draw from these no one need go far—no one need really go out of himself.

Fifty years ago, Carlyle, in whom the truth was always alive, but in whom it was then unperturbed by suffering, by celebrity, and by despair, wrote in his study of Diderot: "Were it not reasonable to prophesy that this exceeding great multitude of novel-writers and such like must, in a new generation, gradually do one of two things: either retire into the nurseries, and work for children, minors, and semi-fatuous persons of both sexes, or else, what were far better, sweep their novel-fabric into the dust-cart, and betake themselves with such faculty as they have to understand and record what is true, of which surely there is, and will forever be, a whole infinitude unknown to us of infinite importance to us? Poetry, it will more and more come to be understood, is nothing but higher knowledge; and the only genuine Romance (for grown persons), Reality."

If, after half a century, fiction still mainly works for "children, minors, and semi-fatuous persons of both sexes," it is nevertheless one of the hopefulest signs of the world's progress that it has begun to work for "grown persons," and if not exactly in the way that Carlyle might have solely intended in urging its writers to compile memoirs instead of building the



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"novel-fabric," still it has, in the highest and widest sense, already made Reality its Romance. I cannot judge it, I do not even care for it, except as it has done this; and I can hardly conceive of a literary self-respect in these days compatible with the old trade of make-believe, with the production of the kind of fiction which is too much honored by classification with card-playing and horse-racing. But let fiction cease to lie about life; let it portray men and women as they are, actuated by the motives and the passions in the measure we all know; let it leave off painting dolls and working them by springs and wires; let it show the different interests in their true proportions; let it forbear to preach pride and revenge, folly and insanity, egotism and prejudice, but frankly own these for what they are, in whatever figures and occasions they appear; let it not put on fine literary airs; let it speak the dialect, the language, that most Americans know—the language of unaffected people everywhere—and there can be no doubt of an unlimited future, not only of delightfulness but of usefulness, for it.

## XIX

THIS is what I say in my severer moods, but at other times I know that, of course, no one is going to hold all fiction to such strict account. There is a great deal of it which may be very well left to amuse us, if it can, when we are sick or when we are silly, and I am not inclined to despise it in the performance of this office. Or, if people find pleasure in having their blood curdled for the sake of having it uncurdled again at the end of the book, I would not interfere with their amusement, though I do not desire it.



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There is a certain demand in primitive natures for the kind of fiction that does this, and the author of it is usually very proud of it. The kind of novels he likes, and likes to write, are intended to take his reader's mind, or what that reader would probably call his mind, off himself; they make one forget life and all its cares and duties; they are not in the least like the novels which make you think of these, and shame you into at least wishing to be a helpfuller and wholesomer creature than you are. No sordid details of verity here, if you please; no wretched being humbly and weakly struggling to do right and to be true, suffering for his follies and his sins, tasting joy only through the mortification of self, and in the help of others; nothing of all this, but a great, whirling splendor of peril and achievement, a wild scene of heroic adventure and of emotional ground and lofty tumbling, with a stage "picture" at the fall of the curtain, and all the good characters in a row, their left hands pressed upon their hearts, and kissing their right hands to the audience, in the old way that has always charmed and always will charm, Heaven bless it!

In a world which loves the spectacular drama and the practically bloodless sports of the modern amphitheatre the author of this sort of fiction has his place, and we must not seek to destroy him because he fancies it the first place. In fact, it is a condition of his doing well the kind of work he does that he should think it important, that he should believe in himself; and I would not take away this faith of his, even if I could. As I say, he has his place. The world often likes to forget itself, and he brings on his heroes, his goblins, his feats, his hair-breadth escapes, his imminent deadly breaches, and the poor, foolish, childish old world re-

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news the excitements of its nonage. Perhaps this is a work of beneficence; and perhaps our brave conjurer in his cabalistic robe is a philanthropist in disguise.

Within the last four or five years there has been throughout the whole English-speaking world what Mr. Grant Allen happily calls the "recrudescence" of taste in fiction. The effect is less noticeable in America than in England, where effete Philistinism, conscious of the dry-rot of its conventionality, is casting about for cure in anything that is wild and strange and unlike itself. But the recrudescence has been evident enough here, too; and a writer in one of our periodicals has put into convenient shape some common errors concerning popularity as a test of merit in a book. He seems to think, for instance, that the love of the marvellous and impossible in fiction, which is shown not only by "the unthinking multitude clamoring about the book counters" for fiction of that sort, but by the "literary elect" also, is proof of some principle in human nature which ought to be respected as well as tolerated. He seems to believe that the ebullition of this passion forms a sufficient answer to those who say that art should represent life, and that the art which misrepresents life is feeble art and false art. But it appears to me that a little carefuller reasoning from a little closer inspection of the facts would not have brought him to these conclusions. In the first place, I doubt very much whether the "literary elect" have been fascinated in great numbers by the fiction in question; but if I supposed them to have really fallen under that spell, I should still be able to account for their fondness and that of the "unthinking multitude" upon the same grounds, without honoring either very much. It is the habit of hasty

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casuists to regard civilization as inclusive of all the members of a civilized community; but this is a palpable error. Many persons in every civilized community live in a state of more or less evident savagery with respect to their habits, their morals, and their propensities; and they are held in check only by the law. Many more yet are savage in their tastes, as they show by the decoration of their houses and persons, and by their choice of books and pictures; and these are left to the restraints of public opinion. In fact, no man can be said to be thoroughly civilized or always civilized; the most refined, the most enlightened person has his moods, his moments of barbarism, in which the best, or even the second best, shall not please him. At these times the lettered and the unlettered are alike primitive and their gratifications are of the same simple sort; the highly cultivated person may then like melodrama, impossible fiction, and the trapeze as sincerely and thoroughly as a boy of thirteen or a barbarian of any age.

I do not blame him for these moods; I find something instructive and interesting in them; but if they lastingly established themselves in him, I could not help deploring the state of that person. No one can really think that the "literary elect," who are said to have joined the "unthinking multitude" in clamoring about the book counters for the romances of no-man's land, take the same kind of pleasure in them as they do in a novel of Tolstoy, Tourguenief, George Eliot, Thackeray, Balzac, Manzoni, Hawthorne, Mr. Henry James, Mr. Thomas Hardy, Señor Palacio Valdés, or even Walter Scott. They have joined the "unthinking multitude," perhaps because they are tired of thinking, and expect to find relaxation in feeling—feeling crudely, grossly, merely. For once in a way

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there is no great harm in this; perhaps no harm at all. It is perfectly natural; let them have their innocent debauch. But let us distinguish, for our own sake and guidance, between the different kinds of things that please the same kind of people; between the things that please them habitually and those that please them occasionally; between the pleasures that edify them and those that amuse them. Otherwise we shall be in danger of becoming permanently part of the "unthinking multitude," and of remaining puerile, primitive, savage. We shall be so in moods and at moments; but let us not fancy that those are high moods or fortunate moments. If they are harmless, that is the most that can be said for them. They are lapses from which we can perhaps go forward more vigorously; but even this is not certain.

My own philosophy of the matter, however, would not bring me to prohibition of such literary amusements as the writer quoted seems to find significant of a growing indifference to truth and sanity in fiction. Once more, I say, these amusements have their place, as the circus has, and the burlesque and negro minstrelsy, and the ballet, and prestidigitation. No one of these is to be despised in its place; but we had better understand that it is not the highest place, and that it is hardly an intellectual delight. The lapse of all the "literary elect" in the world could not dignify unreality; and their present mood, if it exists, is of no more weight against that beauty in literature which comes from truth alone, and never can come from anything else, than the permanent state of the "unthinking multitude."

Yet even as regards the "unthinking multitude," I believe I am not able to take the attitude of the writer I have quoted. I am afraid that I respect them more

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than he would like to have me, though I cannot always respect their taste, any more than that of the "literary elect." I respect them for their good sense in most practical matters; for their laborious, honest lives; for their kindness, their good-will; for that aspiration towards something better than themselves which seems to stir, however dumbly, in every human breast not abandoned to literary pride or other forms of self-righteousness. I find every man interesting, whether he thinks or unthinks, whether he is savage or civilized; for this reason I cannot thank the novelist who teaches us not to know but to unknow our kind. Yet I should by no means hold him to such strict account as Emerson, who felt the absence of the best motive, even in the greatest of the masters, when he said of Shakespeare that, after all, he was only master of the revels. The judgment is so severe, even with the praise which precedes it, that one winces under it; and if one is still young, with the world gay before him, and life full of joyous promise, one is apt to ask, defiantly, Well, what is better than being such a master of the revels as Shakespeare was? Let each judge for himself. To the heart again of serious youth, uncontaminate and exigent of ideal good, it must always be a grief that the great masters seem so often to have been willing to amuse the leisure and vacancy of meaner men, and leave their mission to the soul but partially fulfilled. This, perhaps, was what Emerson had in mind; and if he had it in mind of Shakespeare, who gave us, with his histories and comedies and problems, such a searching homily as "Macbeth," one feels that he scarcely recognized the limitations of the dramatist's art. Few consciences, at times, seem so enlightened as that of this personally unknown person, so withdrawn into his work, and



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so lost to the intensest curiosity of after-time; at other times he seems merely Elizabethan in his coarseness, his courtliness, his imperfect sympathy.

### XX

OF the finer kinds of romance, as distinguished from the novel, I would even encourage the writing, though it is one of the hard conditions of romance that its personages starting with a *parti pris* can rarely be characters with a living growth, but are apt to be types, limited to the expression of one principle, simple, elemental, lacking the God-given complexity of motive which we find in all the human beings we know.

Hawthorne, the great master of the romance, had the insight and the power to create it anew as a kind in fiction; though I am not sure that *The Scarlet Letter* and the *Blithedale Romance* are not, strictly speaking, novels rather than romances. They do not play with some old superstition long outgrown, and they do not invent a new superstition to play with, but deal with things vital in every one's pulse. I am not saying that what may be called the fantastic romance—the romance that descends from *Frankenstein* rather than *The Scarlet Letter*—ought not to be. On the contrary, I should grieve to lose it, as I should grieve to lose the pantomime or the comic opera, or many other graceful things that amuse the passing hour, and help us to live agreeably in a world where men actually sin, suffer, and die. But it belongs to the decorative arts, and though it has a high place among them, it cannot be ranked with the works of the imagination—



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the works that represent and body forth human experience. Its ingenuity can always afford a refined pleasure, and it can often, at some risk to itself, convey a valuable truth.

Perhaps the whole region of historical romance might be reopened with advantage to readers and writers who cannot bear to be brought face to face with human nature, but require the haze of distance or a far perspective, in which all the disagreeable details shall be lost. There is no good reason why these harmless people should not be amused, or their little preferences indulged.

But here, again, I have my modest doubts, some recent instances are so fatuous, as far as the portrayal of character goes, though I find them admirably contrived in some respects. When I have owned the excellence of the staging in every respect, and the conscience with which the carpenter (as the theatrical folks say) has done his work, I am at the end of my praises. The people affect me like persons of our generation made up for the parts; well trained, well costumed, but actors, and almost amateurs. They have the quality that makes the histrionics of amateurs endurable; they are ladies and gentlemen; the worst, the wickedest of them, is a lady or gentleman behind the scene.

Yet, no doubt it is well that there should be a reversion to the earlier types of thinking and feeling, to earlier ways of looking at human nature, and I will not altogether refuse the pleasure offered me by the poetic romancer or the historical romancer because I find my pleasure chiefly in Tolstoy and Valdés and Thomas Hardy and Tourguenief, and Balzac at his best.

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### XXI

It used to be one of the disadvantages of the practice of romance in America, which Hawthorne more or less whimsically lamented, that there were so few shadows and inequalities in our broad level of prosperity; and it is one of the reflections suggested by Dostoïevsky's novel, *The Crime and the Punishment*, that whoever struck a note so profoundly tragic in 'American fiction would do a false and mistaken thing—as false and as mistaken in its way as dealing in American fiction with certain nudities which the Latin peoples seem to find edifying. Whatever their deserts, very few American novelists have been led out to be shot, or finally exiled to the rigors of a winter at Duluth; and in a land where journeymen carpenters and plumbers strike for four dollars a day the sum of hunger and cold is comparatively small, and the wrong from class to class has been almost inappreciable, though all this is changing for the worse. Our novelists, therefore, concern themselves with the more smiling aspects of life, which are the more American, and seek the universal in the individual rather than the social interests. It is worth while, even at the risk of being called commonplace, to be true to our well-to-do actualities; the very passions themselves seem to be softened and modified by conditions which formerly at least could not be said to wrong any one, to cramp endeavor, or to cross lawful desire. Sin and suffering and shame there must always be in the world, I suppose, but I believe that in this new world of ours it is still mainly from one to another one, and oftener still from one to one's self. We have death, too, in America, and a great deal of disagreeable and painful disease, which the multiplicity of our patent medicines

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does not seem to cure; but this is tragedy that comes in the very nature of things, and is not peculiarly American, as the large, cheerful average of health and success and happy life is. It will not do to boast, but it is well to be true to the facts, and to see that, apart from these purely mortal troubles, the race here has enjoyed conditions in which most of the ills that have darkened its annals might be averted by honest work and unselfish behavior.

Fine artists we have among us, and right-minded as far as they go; and we must not forget this at evil moments when it seems as if all the women had taken to writing hysterical improprieties, and some of the men were trying to be at least as hysterical in despair of being as improper. Other traits are much more characteristic of our life and our fiction. In most American novels, vivid and graphic as the best of them are, the people are segregated if not sequestered, and the scene is sparsely populated. The effect may be in instinctive response to the vacancy of our social life, and I shall not make haste to blame it. There are few places, few occasions among us, in which a novelist can get a large number of polite people together, or at least keep them together. Unless he carries a snap-camera his picture of them has no probability; they affect one like the figures perfunctorily associated in such deadly old engravings as that of "Washington Irving and his Friends." Perhaps it is for this reason that we excel in small pieces with three or four figures, or in studies of rustic communities, where there is propinquity if not society. Our grasp of more urbane life is feeble; most attempts to assemble it in our pictures are failures, possibly because it is too transitory, too intangible in its nature with us, to be truthfully represented as really existent.

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I am not sure that the Americans have not brought the short story nearer perfection in the all-round sense that almost any other people, and for reasons very simple and near at hand. It might be argued from the national hurry and impatience that it was a literary form peculiarly adapted to the American temperament, but I suspect that its extraordinary development among us is owing much more to more tangible facts. The success of American magazines, which is nothing less than prodigious, is only commensurate with their excellence. Their sort of success is not only from the courage to decide which ought to please, but from the knowledge of what does please; and it is probable that, aside from the pictures, it is the short stories which please the readers of our best magazines. The serial novels they must have, of course; but rather more of course they must have short stories, and by operation of the law of supply and demand, the short stories, abundant in quantity and excellent in quality, are forthcoming because they are wanted. By another operation of the same law, which political economists have more recently taken account of, the demand follows the supply, and short stories are sought for because there is a proven ability to furnish them, and people read them willingly because they are usually very good. The art of writing them is now so disciplined and diffused with us that there is no lack either for the magazines or for the newspaper "syndicates" which deal in them almost to the exclusion of the serials.

An interesting fact in regard to the different varieties of the short story among us is that the sketches and studies by the women seem faithfuller and more realistic than those of the men, in proportion to their number. Their tendency is more distinctly in that

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direction, and there is a solidity, an honest observation, in the work of such women, which often leaves little to be desired. I should, upon the whole, be disposed to rank American short stories only below those of such Russian writers as I have read, and I should praise rather than blame their free use of our different local parlances, or "dialects," as people call them. I like this because I hope that our inherited English may be constantly freshened and revived from the native sources which our literary decentralization will help to keep open, and I will own that as I turn over novels coming from Philadelphia, from New Mexico, from Boston, from Tennessee, from rural New England, from New York, every local flavor of diction gives me courage and pleasure. Alphonse Daudet, in a conversation with H. H. Boyesen said, speaking of Tourguenief, "What a luxury it must be to have a great big untrodden barbaric language to wade into! We poor fellows who work in the language of an old civilization, we may sit and chisel our little verbal felicities, only to find in the end that it is a borrowed jewel we are polishing. The crown-jewels of our French tongue have passed through the hands of so many generations of monarchs that it seems like presumption on the part of any late-born pretender to attempt to wear them."

This grief is, of course, a little whimsical, yet it has a certain measure of reason in it, and the same regret has been more seriously expressed by the Italian poet Aleardi:

"Muse of an aged people, in the eve  
Of fading civilization, I was born.  
. . . . . Oh, fortunate,  
My sisters, who in the heroic dawn  
Of races sung! To them did destiny give



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The virgin fire and chaste ingenuousness  
Of their land's speech; and, revered, their hands  
Ran over potent strings."

It will never do to allow that we are at such a desperate pass in English, but something of this divine despair we may feel too in thinking of "the spacious times of great Elizabeth," when the poets were trying the stops of the young language, and thrilling with the surprises of their own music. We may comfort ourselves, however, unless we prefer a luxury of grief, by remembering that no language is ever old on the lips of those who speak it, no matter how decrepit it drops from the pen. We have only to leave our studies, editorial and other, and go into the shops and fields to find the "spacious times" again; and from the beginning Realism, before she had put on her capital letter, had divined this near-at-hand truth along with the rest. Lowell, almost the greatest and finest realist who ever wrought in verse, showed us that Elizabeth was still Queen where he heard Yankee farmers talk. One need not invite slang into the company of its betters, though perhaps slang has been dropping its "s" and becoming language ever since the world began, and is certainly sometimes delightful and forcible beyond the reach of the dictionary. I would not have any one go about for new words, but if one of them came aptly, not to reject its help. For our novelists to try to write Americanly, from any motive, would be a dismal error, but being born Americans, I would have them use "Americanisms" whenever these serve their turn; and when their characters speak, I should like to hear them speak true American, with all the varying Tennesseean, Philadelphian, Bostonian, and New York accents. If we bother our-



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selves to write what the critics imagine to be "English," we shall be priggish and artificial, and still more so if we make our Americans talk "English." There is also this serious disadvantage about "English," that if we wrote the best "English" in the world, probably the English themselves would not know it, or, if they did, certainly would not own it. It has always been supposed by grammarians and purists that a language can be kept as they find it; but languages, while they live, are perpetually changing. God apparently meant them for the common people; and the common people will use them freely as they use other gifts of God. On their lips our continental English will differ more and more from the insular English, and I believe that this is not deplorable, but desirable.

In fine, I would have our American novelists be as American as they unconsciously can. Matthew Arnold complained that he found no "distinction" in our life, and I would gladly persuade all artists intending greatness in any kind among us that the recognition of the fact pointed out by Mr. Arnold ought to be a source of inspiration to them, and not discouragement. We have been now some hundred years building up a state on the affirmation of the essential equality of men in their rights and duties, and whether we have been right or been wrong the gods have taken us at our word, and have responded to us with a civilization in which there is no "distinction" perceptible to the eye that loves and values it. Such beauty and such grandeur as we have is common beauty, common grandeur, or the beauty and grandeur in which the quality of solidarity so prevails that neither distinguishes itself to the disadvantage of anything else. It seems to me that these conditions invite the artist to the study

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and the appreciation of the common, and to the portrayal in every art of those finer and higher aspects which unite rather than sever humanity, if he would thrive in our new order of things. The talent that is robust enough to front the every-day world and catch the charm of its work-worn, care-worn, brave, kindly face, need not fear the encounter, though it seems terrible to the sort nurtured in the superstition of the romantic, the bizarre, the heroic, the distinguished, as the things alone worthy of painting or carving or writing. The arts must become democratic, and then we shall have the expression of America in art; and the reproach which Arnold was half right in making us shall have no justice in it any longer; we shall be "distinguished."

### XXII

IN the mean time it has been said with a superficial justice that our fiction is narrow; though in the same sense I suppose the present English fiction is as narrow as our own; and most modern fiction is narrow in a certain sense. In Italy the best men are writing novels as brief and restricted in range as ours; in Spain the novels are intense and deep, and not spacious; the French school, with the exception of Zola, is narrow; the Norwegians are narrow; the Russians, except Tolstoy, are narrow, and the next greatest after him, Tourguenief, is the narrowest great novelist, as to mere dimensions, that ever lived, dealing nearly always with small groups, isolated and analyzed in the most American fashion. In fact, the charge of narrowness accuses the whole tendency of modern fiction as much as the American school. But I do not by any means allow that this narrowness is a

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defect, while denying that it is a universal characteristic of our fiction; it is rather, for the present, a virtue. Indeed, I should call the present American work, North and South, thorough rather than narrow. In one sense it is as broad as life, for each man is a microcosm, and the writer who is able to acquaint us intimately with half a dozen people, or the conditions of a neighborhood or a class, has done something which cannot in any bad sense be called narrow; his breadth is vertical instead of lateral, that is all; and this depth is more desirable than horizontal expansion in a civilization like ours, where the differences are not of classes, but of types, and not of types either so much as of characters. A new method was necessary in dealing with the new conditions, and the new method is world-wide, because the whole world is more or less Americanized. Tolstoy is exceptionally voluminous among modern writers, even Russian writers; and it might be said that the forte of Tolstoy himself is not in his breadth sidewise, but in his breadth upward and downward. *The Death of Ivan Ilyitch* leaves as vast an impression on the reader's soul as any episode of *War and Peace*, which, indeed, can be recalled only in episodes, and not as a whole. I think that our writers may be safely counselled to continue their work in the modern way, because it is the best way yet known. If they make it true, it will be large, no matter what its superficialities are; and it would be the greatest mistake to try to make it big. A big book is necessarily a group of episodes more or less loosely connected by a thread of narrative, and there seems no reason why this thread must always be supplied. Each episode may be quite distinct, or it may be one of a connected group; the final effect will be from the truth of each episode, not from the size of the group.

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The whole field of human experience was never so nearly covered by imaginative literature in any age as in this; and American life especially is getting represented with unexampled fulness. It is true that no one writer, no one book, represents it, for that is not possible; our social and political decentralization forbids this, and may forever forbid it. But a great number of very good writers are instinctively striving to make each part of the country and each phase of our civilization known to all the other parts; and their work is not narrow in any feeble or vicious sense. The world was once very little, and it is now very large. Formerly, all science could be grasped by a single mind; but now the man who hopes to become great or useful in science must devote himself to a single department. It is so in everything—all arts, all trades; and the novelist is not superior to the universal rule against universality. He contributes his share to a thorough knowledge of groups of the human race under conditions which are full of inspiring novelty and interest. He works more fearlessly, frankly, and faithfully than the novelist ever worked before; his work, or much of it, may be destined never to be reprinted from the monthly magazines; but if he turns to his book-shelf and regards the array of the British or other classics, he knows that they, too, are for the most part dead; he knows that the planet itself is destined to freeze up and drop into the sun at last, with all its surviving literature upon it. The question is merely one of time. He consoles himself, therefore, if he is wise, and works on; and we may all take some comfort from the thought that most things cannot be helped. Especially a movement in literature like that which the world is now witnessing cannot be helped; and we could no more turn back and be of the literary

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fashions of any age before this than we could turn back and be of its social, economical, or political conditions.

If I were authorized to address any word directly to our novelists I should say, Do not trouble yourselves about standards or ideals; but try to be faithful and natural: remember that there is no greatness, no beauty, which does not come from truth to your own knowledge of things; and keep on working, even if your work is not long remembered.

At least three-fifths of the literature called classic, in all languages, no more lives than the poems and stories that perish monthly in our magazines. It is all printed and reprinted, generation after generation, century after century; but it is not alive; it is as dead as the people who wrote it and read it, and to whom it meant something, perhaps; with whom it was a fashion, a caprice, a passing taste. A superstitious piety preserves it, and pretends that it has æsthetic qualities which can delight or edify; but nobody really enjoys it, except as a reflection of the past moods and humors of the race, or a revelation of the author's character; otherwise it is trash, and often very filthy trash, which the present trash generally is not.

### XXIII

ONE of the great newspapers the other day invited the prominent American authors to speak their minds upon a point in the theory and practice of fiction which had already vexed some of them. It was the question of how much or how little the American novel ought to deal with certain facts of life which are not usually talked of before young people, and especially young



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ladies. Of course the question was not decided, and I forget just how far the balance inclined in favor of a larger freedom in the matter. But it certainly inclined that way; one or two writers of the sex which is somehow supposed to have purity in its keeping (as if purity were a thing that did not practically concern the other sex, preoccupied with serious affairs) gave it a rather vigorous tilt to that side. In view of this fact it would not be the part of prudence to make an effort to dress the balance; and indeed I do not know that I was going to make any such effort. But there are some things to say, around and about the subject, which I should like to have some one else say, and which I may myself possibly be safe in suggesting.

One of the first of these is the fact, generally lost sight of by those who censure the Anglo-Saxon novel for its prudishness, that it is really not such a prude after all; and that if it is sometimes apparently anxious to avoid those experiences of life not spoken of before young people, this may be an appearance only. Sometimes a novel which has this shuffling air, this effect of truckling to propriety, might defend itself, if it could speak for itself, by saying that such experiences happened not to come within its scheme, and that, so far from maiming or mutilating itself in ignoring them, it was all the more faithfully representative of the tone of modern life in dealing with love that was chaste, and with passion so honest that it could be openly spoken of before the tenderest society bud at dinner. It might say that the guilty intrigue, the betrayal, the extreme flirtation even, was the exceptional thing in life, and unless the scheme of the story necessarily involved it, that it would be bad art to lug it in, and as bad taste as to introduce such topics in a mixed



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company. It could say very justly that the novel in our civilization now always addresses a mixed company, and that the vast majority of the company are ladies, and that very many, if not most, of these ladies are young girls. If the novel were written for men and for married women alone, as in continental Europe, it might be altogether different. But the simple fact is that it is not written for them alone among us, and it is a question of writing, under cover of our universal acceptance, things for young girls to read which you would be put out-of-doors for saying to them, or of frankly giving notice of your intention, and so cutting yourself off from the pleasure—and it is a very high and sweet one—of appealing to these vivid, responsive intelligences, which are none the less brilliant and admirable because they are innocent.

One day a novelist who liked, after the manner of other men, to repine at his hard fate, complained to his friend, a critic, that he was tired of the restriction he had put upon himself in this regard; for it is a mistake, as can be readily shown, to suppose that others impose it. "See how free those French fellows are!" he rebelled. "Shall we always be shut up to our tradition of decency?"

"Do you think it's much worse than being shut up to their tradition of indecency?" said his friend.

Then that novelist began to reflect, and he remembered how sick the invariable motive of the French novel made him. He perceived finally that, convention for convention, ours was not only more tolerable, but on the whole was truer to life, not only to its complexion, but also to its texture. No one will pretend that there is not vicious love beneath the surface of our society; if he did, the fetid explosions of the divorce trials would refute him; but if he pretended

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that it was in any just sense characteristic of our society, he could be still more easily refuted. Yet it exists, and it is unquestionably the material of tragedy, the stuff from which intense effects are wrought. The question, after owning this fact, is whether these intense effects are not rather cheap effects. I incline to think they are, and I will try to say why I think so, if I may do so without offence. The material itself, the mere mention of it, has an instant fascination; it arrests, it detains, till the last word is said, and while there is anything to be hinted. This is what makes a love intrigue of some sort all but essential to the popularity of any fiction. Without such an intrigue the intellectual equipment of the author must be of the highest, and then he will succeed only with the highest class of readers. But any author who will deal with a guilty love intrigue holds all readers in his hand, the highest with the lowest, as long as he hints the slightest hope of the smallest potential naughtiness. He need not at all be a great author; he may be a very shabby wretch, if he has but the courage or the trick of that sort of thing. The critics will call him "virile" and "passionate"; decent people will be ashamed to have been limed by him; but the low average will only ask another chance of flocking into his net. If he happens to be an able writer, his really fine and costly work will be unheeded, and the lure to the appetite will be chiefly remembered. There may be other qualities which make reputations for other men, but in his case they will count for nothing. He pays this penalty for his success in that kind; and every one pays some such penalty who deals with some such material.

But I do not mean to imply that his case covers the whole ground. So far as it goes, though, it ought to

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stop the mouths of those who complain that fiction is enslaved to propriety among us. It appears that of a certain kind of impropriety it is free to give us all it will, and more. But this is not what serious men and women writing fiction mean when they rebel against the limitations of their art in our civilization. They have no desire to deal with nakedness, as painters and sculptors freely do in the worship of beauty; or with certain facts of life, as the stage does, in the service of sensation. But they ask why, when the conventions of the plastic and histrionic arts liberate their followers to the portrayal of almost any phase of the physical or of the emotional nature, an American novelist may not write a story on the lines of *Anna Karénina* or *Madame Bovary*. They wish to touch one of the most serious and sorrowful problems of life in the spirit of Tolstoy and Flaubert, and they ask why they may not. At one time, they remind us, the Anglo-Saxon novelist did deal with such problems—De Foe in his spirit, Richardson in his, Goldsmith in his. 'At what moment did our fiction lose this privilege? In what fatal hour did the Young Girl arise and seal the lips of Fiction, with a touch of her finger, to some of the most vital interests of life?

Whether I wished to oppose them in their aspiration for greater freedom, or whether I wished to encourage them, I should begin to answer them by saying that the Young Girl has never done anything of the kind. The manners of the novel have been improving with those of its readers; that is all. Gentlemen no longer swear or fall drunk under the table, or abduct young ladies and shut them up in lonely country-houses, or so habitually set about the ruin of their neighbors' wives, as they once did. Generally, people now call a spade an agricultural implement; they have

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not grown decent without having also grown a little squeamish, but they have grown comparatively decent; there is no doubt about that. They require of a novelist whom they respect unquestionable proof of his seriousness, if he proposes to deal with certain phases of life; they require a sort of scientific decorum. He can no longer expect to be received on the ground of entertainment only; he assumes a higher function, something like that of a physician or a priest, and they expect him to be bound by laws as sacred as those of such professions; they hold him solemnly pledged not to betray them or abuse their confidence. If he will accept the conditions, they give him their confidence, and he may then treat to his greater honor, and not at all to his disadvantage, of such experiences, such relations of men and women as George Eliot treats in *'Adam Bede*, in *Daniel Deronda*, in *Romola*, in almost all her books; such as Hawthorne treats in *The Scarlet Letter*; such as Dickens treats in *David Copperfield*; such as Thackeray treats in *Pendennis*, and glances at in every one of his fictions; such as most of the masters of English fiction have at some time treated more or less openly. It is quite false or quite mistaken to suppose that our novels have left untouched these most important realities of life. They have only not made them their stock in trade; they have kept a true perspective in regard to them; they have relegated them in their pictures of life to the space and place they occupy in life itself, as we know it in England and America. They have kept a correct proportion, knowing perfectly well that unless the novel is to be a map, with everything scrupulously laid down in it, a faithful record of life in far the greater extent could be made to the exclusion of guilty love and all its circumstances and consequences.

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I justify them in this view not only because I hate what is cheap and meretricious, and hold in peculiar loathing the cant of the critics who require "passion" as something in itself admirable and desirable in a novel, but because I prize fidelity in the historian of feeling and character. Most of these critics who demand "passion" would seem to have no conception of any passion but one. Yet there are several other passions: the passion of grief, the passion of avarice, the passion of pity, the passion of ambition, the passion of hate, the passion of envy, the passion of devotion, the passion of friendship; and all these have a greater part in the drama of life than the passion of love, and infinitely greater than the passion of guilty love. Wittingly or unwittingly, English fiction and American fiction have recognized this truth, not fully, not in the measure it merits, but in greater degree than most other fiction.

### XXIV

Who can deny that fiction would be incomparably stronger, incomparably truer, if once it could tear off the habit which enslaves it to the celebration chiefly of a single passion, in one phase or another, and could frankly dedicate itself to the service of all the passions, all the interests, all the facts? Every novelist who has thought about his art knows that it would, and I think that upon reflection he must doubt whether his sphere would be greatly enlarged if he were allowed to treat freely the darker aspects of the favorite passion. But, as I have shown, the privilege, the right to do this, is already perfectly recognized. This is proved again by the fact that serious criticism recognizes as master-



works (I will not push the question of supremacy) the two great novels which above all others have moved the world by their study of guilty love. If by any chance, if by some prodigious miracle, any American should now arise to treat it on the level of *Anna Karénina* and *Madame Bovary*, he would be absolutely sure of success, and of fame and gratitude as great as those books have won for their authors.

But what editor of what American magazine would print such a story?

Certainly I do not think any one would; and here our novelist must again submit to conditions. If he wishes to publish such a story (supposing him to have once written it), he must publish it as a book. A book is something by itself, responsible for its character, which becomes quickly known, and it does not necessarily penetrate to every member of the household. The father or the mother may say to the child, "I would rather you wouldn't read that book"; if the child cannot be trusted, the book may be locked up. But with the magazine and its serial the affair is different. Between the editor of a reputable English or American magazine and the families which receive it there is a tacit agreement that he will print nothing which a father may not read to his daughter, or safely leave her to read herself.

After all, it is a matter of business; and the insurgent novelist should consider the situation with coolness and common-sense. The editor did not create the situation; but it exists, and he could not even attempt to change it without many sorts of disaster. He respects it, therefore, with the good faith of an honest man. Even when he is himself a novelist, with ardor for his art and impatience of the limitations put upon it, he interposes his veto, as Thackeray did in the case



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of Trollope when a contributor approaches forbidden ground.

It does not avail to say that the daily papers teem with facts far fouler and deadlier than any which fiction could imagine. That is true, but it is true also that the sex which reads the most novels reads the fewest newspapers; and, besides, the reporter does not command the novelist's skill to fix impressions in a young girl's mind or to suggest conjecture. The magazine is a little despotic, a little arbitrary; but unquestionably its favor is essential to success, and its conditions are not such narrow ones. You cannot deal with Tolstoy's and Flaubert's subjects in the absolute artistic freedom of Tolstoy and Flaubert; since De Foe, that is unknown among us; but if you deal with them in the manner of George Eliot, of Thackeray, of Dickens, of society, you may deal with them even in the magazines. There is no other restriction upon you. All the horrors and miseries and tortures are open to you; your pages may drop blood; sometimes it may happen that the editor will even exact such strong material from you. But probably he will require nothing but the observance of the convention in question; and if you do not yourself prefer bloodshed he will leave you free to use all sweet and peaceable means of interesting his readers.

It is no narrow field he throws open to you, with that little sign to keep off the grass up at one point only. Its vastness is still almost unexplored, and whole regions in it are unknown to the fictionist. Dig anywhere, and do but dig deep enough, and you strike riches; or, if you are of the mind to range, the gentler climes, the softer temperatures, the serener skies, are all free to you, and are so little visited that the chance of novelty is greater among them.

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### XXV

WHILE the Americans have greatly excelled in the short story generally, they have almost created a species of it in the Thanksgiving story. We have transplanted the Christmas story from England, while the Thanksgiving story is native to our air; but both are of Anglo-Saxon growth. Their difference is from a difference of environment; and the Christmas story when naturalized among us becomes almost identical in motive, incident, and treatment with the Thanksgiving story. If I were to generalize a distinction between them, I should say that the one dealt more with marvels and the other more with morals; and yet the critic should beware of speaking too confidently on this point. It is certain, however, that the Christmas season is meteorologically more favorable to the effective return of persons long supposed lost at sea, or from a prodigal life, or from a darkened mind. The longer, darker, and colder nights are better adapted to the apparition of ghosts, and to all manner of signs and portents; while they seem to present a wider field for the intervention of angels in behalf of orphans and outcasts. The dreams of elderly sleepers at this time are apt to be such as will effect a lasting change in them when they awake, turning them from the hard, cruel, and grasping habits of a lifetime, and reconciling them to their sons, daughters, and nephews, who have thwarted them in marriage; or softening them to their meek, uncomplaining wives, whose hearts they have trampled upon in their reckless pursuit of wealth; and generally disposing them to a distribution of hampers among the sick and poor, and to a friendly reception of gentlemen with charity subscription papers.

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Ships readily drive upon rocks in the early twilight, and offer exciting difficulties of salvage; and the heavy snows gather quickly round the steps of wanderers who lie down to die in them, preparatory to their discovery and rescue by immediate relatives. The midnight weather is also very suitable for encounter with murderers and burglars; and the contrast of its freezing gloom with the light and cheer in-doors promotes the gayeties which merge, at all well-regulated country-houses, in love and marriage. In the region of pure character no moment could be so available for flinging off the mask of frivolity, or imbecility, or savagery, which one has worn for ten or twenty long years, say, for the purpose of foiling some villain, and surprising the reader, and helping the author out with his plot. Persons abroad in the Alps, or Apennines, or Pyrenees, or anywhere seeking shelter in the huts of shepherds or the dens of smugglers, find no time like it for lying in a feigned slumber, and listening to the whispered machinations of their suspicious-looking entertainers, and then suddenly starting up and fighting their way out; or else springing from the real sleep into which they have sunk exhausted, and finding it broad day and the good peasants whom they had so unjustly doubted, waiting breakfast for them.

We need not point out the superior advantages of the Christmas season for anything one has a mind to do with the French Revolution, of the Arctic explorations, or the Indian Mutiny, or the horrors of Siberian exile; there is no time so good for the use of this material; and ghosts on shipboard are notoriously fond of Christmas Eve. In our own logging camps the man who has gone into the woods for the winter, after quarrelling with his wife, then hears her sad appealing voice, and is moved to good

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resolutions as at no other period of the year; and in the mining regions, first in California and later in Colorado, the hardened reprobate, dying in his boots, smells his mother's dough-nuts, and breathes his last in a soliloquized vision of the old home, and the little brother, or sister, or the old father coming to meet him from heaven; while his rude companions listen round him, and dry their eyes on the butts of their revolvers.

It has to be very grim, all that, to be truly effective; and here, already, we have a touch in the Americanized Christmas story of the moralistic quality of the American Thanksgiving story. This was seldom written, at first, for the mere entertainment of the reader; it was meant to entertain him, of course; but it was meant to edify him, too, and to improve him; and some such intention is still present in it. I rather think that it deals more probably with character to this end than its English cousin, the Christmas story, does. It is not so improbable that a man should leave off being a drunkard on Thanksgiving, as that he should leave off being a curmudgeon on Christmas; that he should conquer his appetite as that he should instantly change his nature, by good resolutions. He would be very likely, indeed, to break his resolutions in either case, but not so likely in the one as in the other.

Generically, the Thanksgiving story is cheerfuller in its drama and simpler in its persons than the Christmas story. Rarely has it dealt with the supernatural, either the apparition of ghosts or the intervention of angels. The weather being so much milder at the close of November than it is a month later, very little can be done with the elements; though on the coast a northeasterly storm has been, and can be, very

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usefully employed. The Thanksgiving story is more restricted in its range; the scene is still mostly in New England, and the characters are of New England extraction, who come home from the West usually, or New York, for the event of the little drama, whatever it may be. It may be the reconciliation of kinsfolk who have quarrelled; or the union of lovers long estranged; or husbands and wives who have had hard words and parted; or mothers who had thought their sons dead in California and find themselves agreeably disappointed in their return; or fathers who for old time's sake receive back their erring and conveniently dying daughters. The notes are not many which this simple music sounds, but they have a Sabbath tone, mostly, and win the listener to kindlier thoughts and better moods. The art is at its highest in some strong sketch of Rose Terry Cooke's, or some perfectly satisfying study of Miss Jewett's, or some graphic situation of Miss Wilkins's; and then it is a very fine art. But mostly it is poor and rude enough, and makes openly, shamelessly, for the reader's emotions, as well as his morals. It is inclined to be rather descriptive. The turkey, the pumpkin, the corn-field, figure throughout; and the leafless woods are blue and cold against the evening sky behind the low hip-roofed, old-fashioned homestead. The parlance is usually the Yankee dialect and its Western modifications.

The Thanksgiving story is mostly confined in scene to the country; it does not seem possible to do much with it in town; and it is a serious question whether with its geographical and topical limitations it can hold its own against the Christmas story; and whether it would not be well for authors to consider a combination with its elder rival.

The two feasts are so near together in point of time



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that they could be easily covered by the sentiment of even a brief narrative. Under the agglutinated style of *A Thanksgiving-Christmas Story*, fiction appropriate to both could be produced, and both could be employed naturally and probably in the transaction of its affairs and the development of its characters. The plot for such a story could easily be made to include a total-abstinence pledge and family reunion at Thanksgiving, and an apparition and spiritual regeneration over a bowl of punch at Christmas.

### XXVI

It would be interesting to know the far beginnings of holiday literature, and I commend the quest to the scientific spirit which now specializes research in every branch of history. In the mean time, without being too confident of the facts, I venture to suggest that it came in with the romantic movement about the beginning of this century, when mountains ceased to be horrid and became picturesque; when ruins of all sorts, but particularly abbeys and castles, became habitable to the most delicate constitutions; when the despised Gothick of Addison dropped its "k," and arose the chivalrous and religious Gothic of Scott; when ghosts were redeemed from the contempt into which they had fallen, and resumed their place in polite society; in fact, the politer the society, the welcomer the ghosts, and whatever else was out of the common. In that day the Annual flourished, and this artificial flower was probably the first literary blossom on the Christmas Tree which has since borne so much tinsel foliage and painted fruit. But the Annual was extremely Oriental; it was much preoccupied with Haidees and Gul-



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nares and Zuleikas, with Hindas and Nourmahals, owing to the distinction which Byron and Moore had given such ladies; and when it began to concern itself with the actualities of British beauty, the daughters of Albion, though inscribed with the names of real countesses and duchesses, betrayed their descent from the well-known Eastern odalisques. It was possibly through an American that holiday literature became distinctively English in material, and Washington Irving, with his New World love of the past, may have given the impulse to the literary worship of Christmas which has since so widely established itself. A festival revived in popular interest by a New-Yorker to whom Dutch associations with New-year's had endeared the German ideal of Christmas, and whom the robust gayeties of the season in old-fashioned country-houses had charmed, would be one of those roundabout results which destiny likes, and "would at least be Early English."

If we cannot claim with all the patriotic confidence we should like to feel that it was Irving who set Christmas in that light in which Dickens saw its æsthetic capabilities, it is perhaps because all origins are obscure. For anything that we positively know to the contrary, the Druidic rites from which English Christmas borrowed the inviting mistletoe, if not the decorative holly, may have been accompanied by the recitations of holiday triads. But it is certain that several plays of Shakespeare were produced, if not written, for the celebration of the holidays, and that then the black tide of Puritanism which swept over men's souls blotted out all such observance of Christmas with the festival itself. It came in again, by a natural reaction, with the returning Stuarts, and throughout the period of the Restoration it enjoyed a

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perfunctory favor. There is mention of it often enough in the eighteenth-century essayists, in the *Spectators* and *Idlers* and *Tatlers*; but the World about the middle of the last century laments the neglect into which it had fallen. Irving seems to have been the first to observe its surviving rites lovingly, and Dickens divined its immense advantage as a literary occasion. He made it in some sort entirely his for a time, and there can be no question but it was he who again endeared it to the whole English-speaking world, and gave it a wider and deeper hold than it had ever had before upon the fancies and affections of our race.

The might of that great talent no one can gainsay, though in the light of the truer work which has since been done his literary principles seem almost as grotesque as his theories of political economy. In no one direction was his erring force more felt than in the creation of holiday literature as we have known it for the last half-century. Creation, of course, is the wrong word; it says too much; but in default of a better word, it may stand. He did not make something out of nothing; the material was there before him; the mood and even the need of his time contributed immensely to his success, as the volition of the subject helps on the mesmerist; but it is within bounds to say that he was the chief agency in the development of holiday literature as we have known it, as he was the chief agency in universalizing the great Christian holiday as we now have it. Other agencies wrought with him and after him; but it was he who rescued Christmas from Puritan distrust, and humanized it and consecrated it to the hearts and homes of all.

Very rough magic, as it now seems, he used in working his miracle, but there is no doubt about his working it. One opens his Christmas stories in this later

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day—*The Carol, The Chimes, The Haunted Man, The Cricket on the Hearth*, and all the rest—and with “a heart high-sorrowful and cloyed,” asks himself for the preternatural virtue that they once had. The pathos appears false and strained; the humor largely horse-play; the character theatrical; the joviality pumped; the psychology commonplace; the sociology alone funny. It is a world of real clothes, earth, air, water, and the rest; the people often speak the language of life, but their motives are as disproportioned and improbable, and their passions and purposes as overcharged, as those of the worst of Balzac’s people. Yet all these monstrosities, as they now appear, seem to have once had symmetry and verity; they moved the most cultivated intelligences of the time; they touched true hearts; they made everybody laugh and cry.

This was perhaps because the imagination, from having been fed mostly upon gross unrealities, always responds readily to fantastic appeals. There has been an amusing sort of awe of it, as if it were the channel of inspired thought, and were somehow sacred. The most preposterous inventions of its activity have been regarded in their time as the greatest feats of the human mind, and in its receptive form it has been nursed into an imbecility to which the truth is repugnant, and the fact that the beautiful resides nowhere else is inconceivable. It has been flattered out of all sufferance in its toying with the mere elements of character, and its attempts to present these in combinations foreign to experience are still praised by the poorer sort of critics as masterpieces of creative work.

In the day of Dickens’s early Christmas stories it was thought admirable for the author to take types of humanity which everybody knew, and to add to them

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from his imagination till they were as strange as beasts and birds talking. Now we begin to feel that human nature is quite enough, and that the best an author can do is to show it as it is. But in those stories of his Dickens said to his readers, Let us make believe so-and-so; and the result was a joint juggle, a child's-play, in which the wholesome allegiance to life was lost. Artistically, therefore, the scheme was false, and artistically, therefore, it must perish. It did not perish, however, before it had propagated itself in a whole school of unrealities so ghastly that one can hardly recall without a shudder those sentimentalities at second-hand to which holiday literature was abandoned long after the original conjurer had wearied of his performance.

Under his own eye and of conscious purpose a circle of imitators grew up in the fabrication of Christmas stories. They obviously formed themselves upon his sobered ideals; they collaborated with him, and it was often hard to know whether it was Dickens or Sala or Collins who was writing. The Christmas book had by that time lost its direct application to Christmas. It dealt with shipwrecks a good deal, and with perilous adventures of all kinds, and with unmerited suffering, and with ghosts and mysteries, because human nature, secure from storm and danger in a well-lighted room before a cheerful fire, likes to have these things imaged for it, and its long-puerilized fancy will bear an endless repetition of them. The wizards who wrought their spells with them contented themselves with the lasting efficacy of these simple means; and the apprentice-wizards and journeyman-wizards who have succeeded them practise the same arts at the old stand; but the ethical intention which gave dignity to Dickens's Christmas stories of still earlier date has almost wholly

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disappeared. It was a quality which could not be worked so long as the phantoms and hair-breadth escapes. People always knew that character is not changed by a dream in a series of tableaux; that a ghost cannot do much towards reforming an inordinately selfish person; that a life cannot be turned white, like a head of hair, in a single night, by the most allegorical apparition; that want and sin and shame cannot be cured by kettles singing on the hob; and gradually they ceased to make believe that there was virtue in these devices and appliances. Yet the ethical intention was not fruitless, crude as it now appears.

It was well once a year, if not oftener, to remind men by parable of the old, simple truths; to teach them that forgiveness, and charity, and the endeavor for life better and purer than each has lived, are the principles upon which alone the world holds together and gets forward. It was well for the comfortable and the refined to be put in mind of the savagery and suffering all round them, and to be taught, as Dickens was always teaching, that certain feelings which grace human nature, as tenderness for the sick and helpless, self-sacrifice and generosity, self-respect and manliness and womanliness, are the common heritage of the race, the direct gift of Heaven, shared equally by the rich and poor. It did not necessarily detract from the value of the lesson that, with the imperfect art of the time, he made his paupers and porters not only human, but superhuman, and too altogether virtuous; and it remained true that home life may be lovely under the lowliest roof, although he liked to paint it without a shadow on its beauty there. It is still a fact that the sick are very often saintly, although he put no peevishness into their patience with their ills. His ethical



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intention told for manhood and fraternity and tolerance, and when this intention disappeared from the better holiday literature, that literature was sensibly the poorer for the loss.

### XXVII

BUT if the humanitarian impulse has mostly disappeared from Christmas fiction, I think it has never so generally characterized all fiction. One may refuse to recognize this impulse; one may deny that it is in any greater degree shaping life than ever before, but no one who has the current of literature under his eye can fail to note it there. People are thinking and feeling generously, if not living justly, in our time; it is a day of anxiety to be saved from the curse that is on selfishness, of eager question how others shall be helped, of bold denial that the conditions in which we would fain have rested are sacred or immutable. Especially in America, where the race has gained a height never reached before, the eminence enables more men than ever before to see how even here vast masses of men are sunk in misery that must grow every day more hopeless, or embroiled in a struggle for mere life that must end in enslaving and imbruting them.

Art, indeed, is beginning to find out that if it does not make friends with Need it must perish. It perceives that to take itself from the many and leave them no joy in their work, and to give itself to the few whom it can bring no joy in their idleness, is an error that kills. The men and women who do the hard work of the world have learned that they have a right to pleasure in their toil, and that when justice is done



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them they will have it. In all ages poetry has affirmed something of this sort, but it remained for ours to perceive it and express it somehow in every form of literature. But this is only one phase of the devotion of the best literature of our time to the service of humanity. No book written with a low or cynical motive could succeed now, no matter how brilliantly written; and the work done in the past to the glorification of mere passion and power, to the deification of self, appears monstrous and hideous. The romantic spirit worshipped genius, worshipped heroism, but at its best, in such a man as Victor Hugo, this spirit recognized the supreme claim of the lowest humanity. Its error was to idealize the victims of society, to paint them impossibly virtuous and beautiful; but truth, which has succeeded to the highest mission of romance, paints these victims as they are, and bids the world consider them not because they are beautiful and virtuous, but because they are ugly and vicious, cruel, filthy, and only not altogether loathsome because the divine can never wholly die out of the human. The truth does not find these victims among the poor alone, among the hungry, the houseless, the ragged; but it also finds them among the rich, cursed with the aimlessness, the satiety, the despair of wealth, wasting their lives in a fool's paradise of shows and semblances, with nothing real but the misery that comes of insincerity and selfishness.

I do not think the fiction of our own time even always equal to this work, or perhaps more than seldom so. But as I once expressed, to the long-reverberating discontent of two continents, fiction is now a finer art than it has been hitherto, and more nearly meets the requirements of the infallible standard. I have hopes of real usefulness in it, because it is at last building

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on the only sure foundation; but I am by no means certain that it will be the ultimate literary form, or will remain as important as we believe it is destined to become. On the contrary, it is quite imaginable that when the great mass of readers, now sunk in the foolish joys of mere fable, shall be lifted to an interest in the meaning of things through the faithful portrayal of life in fiction, then fiction the most faithful may be superseded by a still more faithful form of contemporaneous history. I willingly leave the precise character of this form to the more robust imagination of readers whose minds have been nurtured upon romantic novels, and who really have an imagination worth speaking of, and confine myself, as usual, to the hither side of the regions of conjecture.

The art which in the mean time disdains the office of teacher is one of the last refuges of the aristocratic spirit which is disappearing from politics and society, and is now seeking to shelter itself in æsthetics. The pride of caste is becoming the pride of taste; but as before, it is averse to the mass of men; it consents to know them only in some conventionalized and artificial guise. It seeks to withdraw itself, to stand aloof; to be distinguished, and not to be identified. Democracy in literature is the reverse of all this. It wishes to know and to tell the truth, confident that consolation and delight are there; it does not care to paint the marvellous and impossible for the vulgar many, or to sentimentalize and falsify the actual for the vulgar few. Men are more like than unlike one another: let us make them know one another better, that they may be all humbled and strengthened with a sense of their fraternity. Neither arts, nor letters, nor sciences, except as they somehow, clearly or obscurely, tend to make the race better and kinder, are to be regarded as

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serious interests; they are all lower than the rudest crafts that feed and house and clothe, for except they do this office they are idle; and they cannot do this except from and through the truth.

THE END



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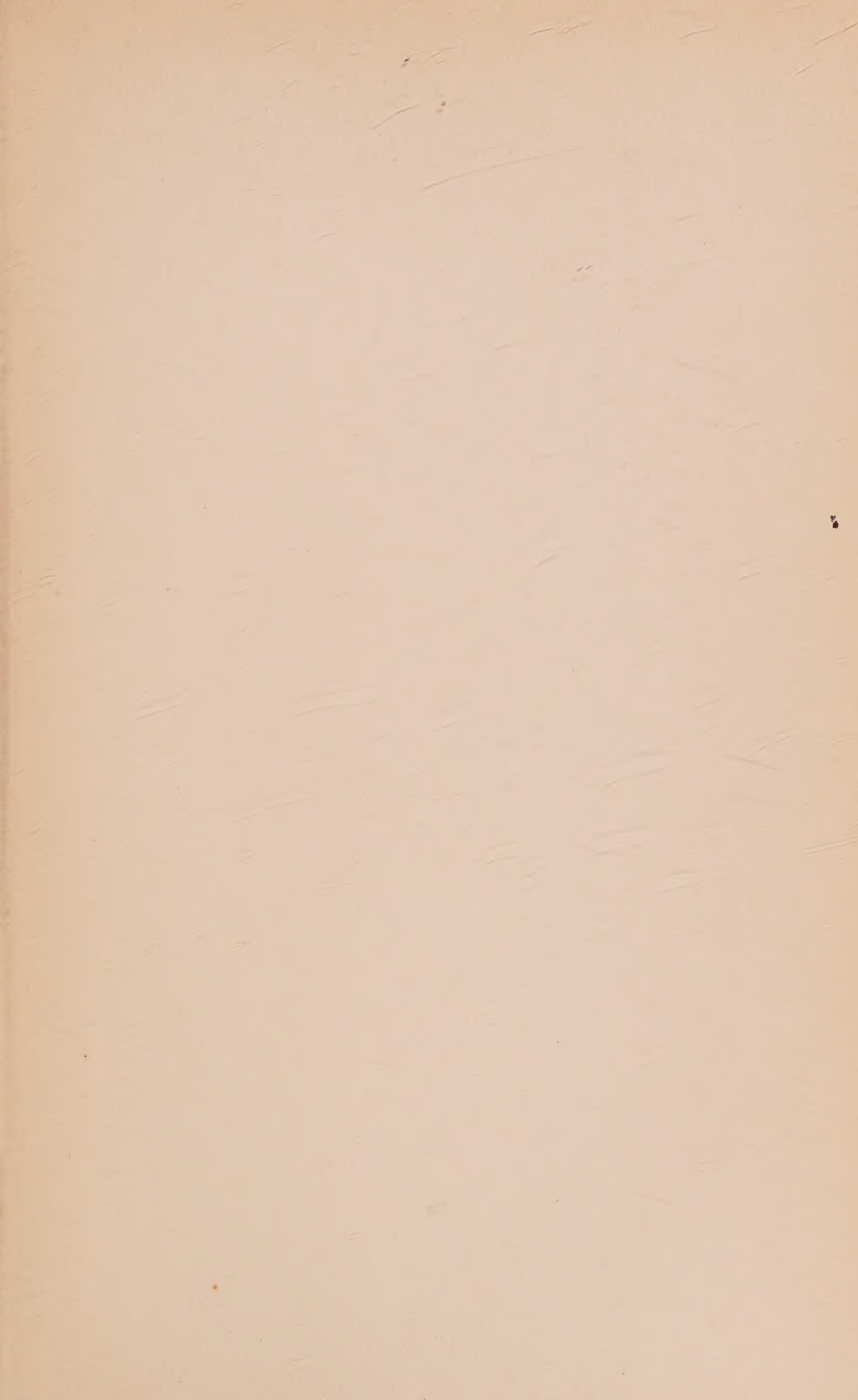
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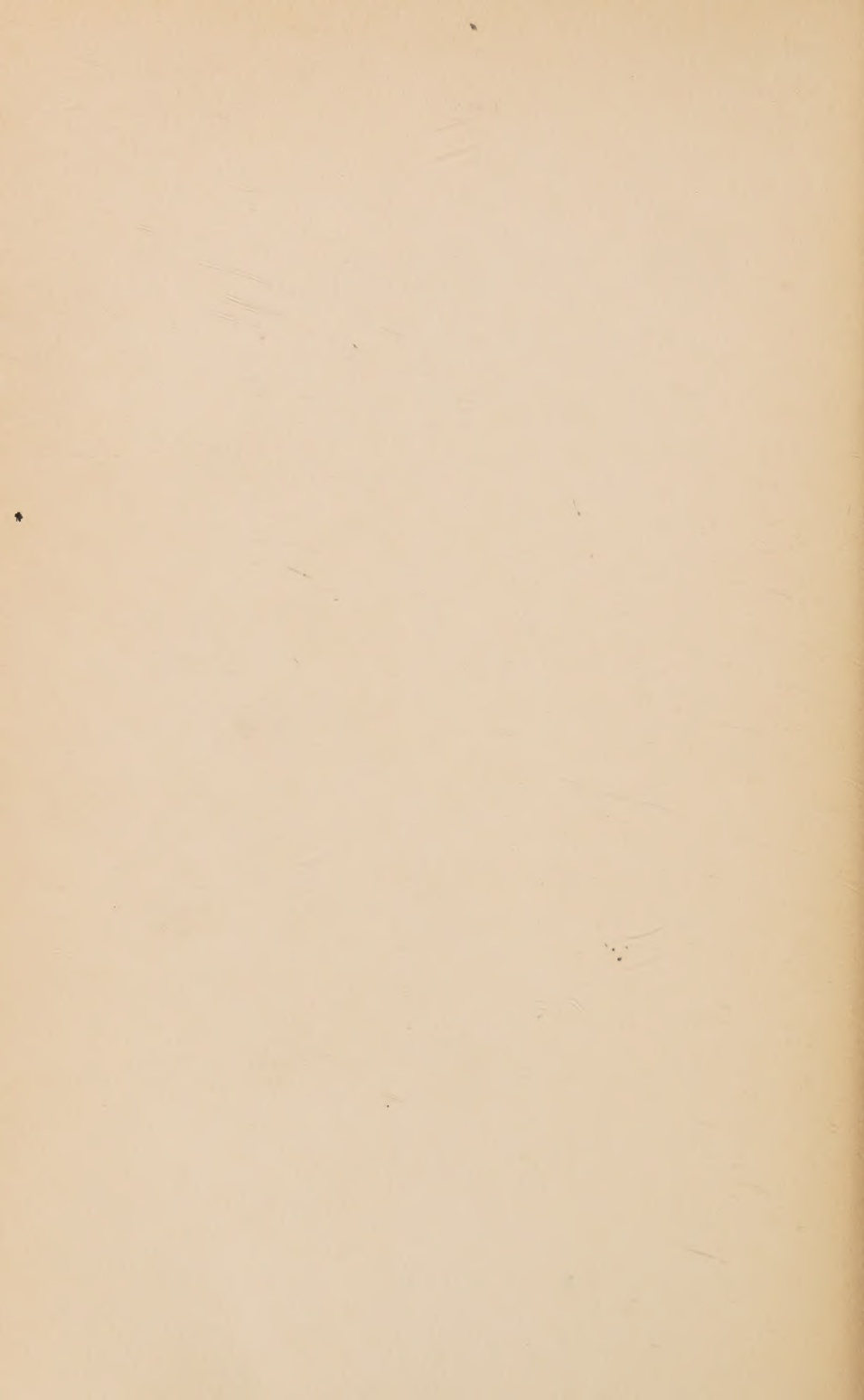
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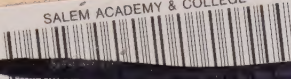








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